imagine being loved by me

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by katerpillar

Summary

Now that he's looking for it, Yuuji can feel it: the words are etched into him, woven into his muscles and carved into his bones. *Start by saving me, Itadori.* Yuuji promised he would, so now he must.

The burning pain is starting to come back again. It begins in his chest this time, slightly to the right. Yuuji swallows, reaching up to press his hand against it.

So, he thinks dazedly, as the universe begins to take him apart. *This is what happens when you break a Binding Vow.*

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Megumi dies in Shinjuku. Yuuji is thrown back in time to save him. Again, and again, and again.

(Or: Yuuji says “I’ll save you, Fushiguro” and the universe says “bet.”)

Chapter 1: a yellow wood

Chapter Notes

this entire fic contains **MAJOR SPOILERS FOR THE ENTIRE MANGA.** This chapter in particular contains spoilers from **manga chapter 261.** Future chapters will also be tagged with the relevant spoiler warnings.

If you haven't read at least up to chapter 261 and you DON'T want to be spoiled, turn back now. Spoilers start from very early on in this fic. Seriously!!

One last thing: it's already addressed in the tags, but the main character death warning is temporary. Rest assured this fic has a happy ending.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the aftermath, Yuuji stands and stares.

There's a body on the ground. There's a body on the ground, and it's not the body he was fighting thirty seconds ago. No, this body is smaller—skinnier—more familiar—more *loved* —

Yuuji breaks into a run.

The ground is uneven. The concrete's cracked and ripped up in chunks like an earthquake's just come through; Yuuji tears his sleeve on one jagged piece of ex-Shinjuku, then scratches his ankle on another. He barely notices. All that matters is getting to that body and seeing if the chest is still moving.

When Yuuji reaches the body, he drops to his knees. The body is shirtless. It's badly scraped-up. There's a pool of blood beneath the head, and fresh wounds beneath the arms, and half the stomach has been carved away like it was cut into with a giant spoon—

Yuuji reaches for the face and pushes the bloody hair aside. His hands are shaking. He hopes, for one stupid second, that it's not really him.

But it is. It *is.* It's Fushiguro—Fushiguro, not Sukuna. Fushiguro with his dark hair and long lashes and lean arms, Fushiguro with his killer jawline, Fushiguro with that one mole behind his ear that Yuuji never told him about because he was afraid Fushiguro would grow his hair out to cover it. It's Fushiguro, Fushiguro, *Fushiguro*—

"Fushiguro," Yuuji croaks out uselessly. The name burns his throat. Fushiguro doesn't stir. His eyes are half-lidded—there's the tiniest glimpse of green there, glassy and unseeing. Yuuji's been longing to see that shade of green for over a month, and now that it's back, he

only gets a sliver of it. He wants Fushiguro to open his eyes. He wants Fushiguro to move. He wants Fushiguro to breathe—

Wait. Is he breathing?

Yuuji's body moves strangely. His movements are jerky and too sharp. He feels like there's a disconnect between his brain and the rest of him. When he leans down, he's acting on autopilot. He puts his ear to Fushiguro's mouth.

He waits three seconds. Then five, then ten, then fifteen.

He hears nothing. No puff of breath, no wheeze in Fushiguro's chest. Nothing. *Nothing.* The blood is starting to soak into the knees of Yuuji's pants.

"Ieiri-san," Yuuji mutters. It's almost to himself at first, and then he bolts upright, looking around wildly for Mei-Mei's crows. "Ieiri-san. *Ieiri-san!"*

If she can get here in time—if Ui-Ui can teleport her—if she can save him—

"Itadori-kun?"

The voice comes from behind him, and it's accompanied by a hacking cough. Yuuji's first instinct is to throw himself over Fushiguro to protect him. His second instinct is to turn around.

Fushiguro's killer—no. It's not his killer. It's not his killer, because Yuuji refuses to believe that he's dead. Fushiguro's *attacker* is standing there, just a few paces away. The person who put that huge, gaping hole through his stomach. The person who had pointed their fingers at Sukuna's gut, at *Fushiguro's* gut, and fired Hollow Purple point-blank.

Okkotsu Yuuta, Sukuna had said.

He doesn't look like Okkotsu. He looks like Gojo. It's the same face that Yuuji has grown to know so well over these last few months: white hair, blue eyes, proud nose. But Gojo has never called Yuuji *Itadori-kun,* and Gojo has never worn a line of stitches across his brow. And Gojo has never looked like this. Gojo has never looked unsure.

"Itadori-kun," Okkotsu-in-Gojo's-body says again. There's a strip of skin showing at his waist where his shirt was cut away, and Yuuji can see a line of stitches there too, still fresh and angry-looking. "Fushiguro-kun, is he—"

"You," Yuuji croaks out, and Okkotsu falls silent. He's swaying on his feet, Yuuji realises suddenly. He looks exhausted. "You—what did you do."

It's not a question. They both know what Okkotsu's done. The evidence is written across Okkotsu's forehead. The evidence is lying in front of Yuuji, his blood slowly staining Yuuji's clothes.

"Itadori-kun—"

"What did you do?"

Okkotsu opens his mouth to answer, but he coughs instead. Blood flecks the corners of his mouth. *He's dying,* Yuuji thinks. He killed Sukuna and now he's dying. He killed Fushiguro and now he's—

"Itadori, move!"

Yuuji whips his head around. A small, animal noise of relief catches in the back of his throat.

Ieiri. She's here, Ui-Ui letting go of her the second they touch the ground. Her hair is a mess. Her sleeves are soaked with blood all the way to the elbows. Her eyes are wide and fixed on Fushiguro.

Fushiguro.

Ieiri's here now, so he'll be okay, right? He has to be okay, right? Yuuji practically throws himself out of the way to give Ieiri space. She drops to her knees by Fushiguro's side, her hands outstretched, and then—

Yuuji had screamed for her. He'd looked up at the sky and *begged* her to come, to help, to save Fushiguro's life. Now, Ieiri kneels beside him, her hands resting on the wound in Fushiguro's abdomen. Her fingers sink into the exposed flesh. Yuuji sees a brief flicker of white light under her nails, and he waits for the familiar sight of flesh stitching itself back together, but—

But Ieiri goes still. She stares down at Fushiguro for a long handful of moments. The light flickers and dies. For a second—just a second—Ieiri's eyes flutter shut, and she lets out a tiny, shaky breath.

Then, abruptly, she turns around. Her hands leave Fushiguro, and she reaches for Okkotsu instead. "Rika's still got your body," she says, the words sharp and snappy. "If you get back to it in time, then—"

What?

"Wait," Yuuji blurts out. "Fushiguro—"

Ieiri's lips press together into a thin, thin line.

Yuuji's heart feels like it's been hanging by a single fraying thread ever since the smoke cleared and he saw Fushiguro's body. Now, as he meets Ieiri's exhausted gaze, he feels that thread snap.

"No," he says. His voice feels like it's being dragged out of him, a long red string that's being unspooled from somewhere deep within his gut. "No. No, Ieiri-san—*Ieiri-san—"*

"He's already dead, Itadori," Ieiri says softly. "There's nothing I can do. Okkotsu is my priority now."

With that, she turns away. She gets up—away from Fushiguro—and moves towards Okkotsu, who crumples to his knees the second she reaches him. Yuuji watches them, watches how Ieiri lets out a long string of swears and presses her hand to Okkotsu's chest. Yuuji realises, for the first time, that there's a wound there: a deep slash, from armpit to waist.

When Ieiri uses her Reverse Cursed Technique, Okkotsu's body starts to mend itself in the way that Fushiguro's didn't. Yuuji turns back to the body in front of him.

If he doesn't look at the stomach wound, then maybe it won't exist. If he doesn't look at it—if he just focuses on Fushiguro's face—if he leans down, cradles Fushiguro's jaw in his hands, rests his forehead on Fushiguro's brow—

"Fushiguro," he says again. His breath stirs Fushiguro's hair. "Come on. Get up. You can get up, right? You can still hear me, right?"

He stares into that tiny, tiny glint of green under Fushiguro's eyelids. He waits for Fushiguro to blink, to focus on him, to groan and complain that Yuuji's suffocating him. This can't be how it ends. This can't be it. Yuuji refuses. He won't allow it. Fushiguro has to live.

But Fushiguro's eyes don't move. His lips, slightly ajar, don't twitch with an exhale. His chest is so very still.

"Fushiguro," Yuuji says again, and the world is starting to go blurry at the edges. Something hot is pricking his eyes—tears. "Fushiguro, come on. Fushiguro. *Fushiguro."*

If he says it enough times, then he might be able to call Fushiguro back. Maybe it's like waking someone up from a deep sleep. Maybe Fushiguro will open his eyes properly just so he can tell Yuuji to shut up. Maybe, after this last month from hell, after all these weeks of Yuuji hoping and wishing and praying, Fushiguro will finally *come back.*

The first tear that falls from Yuuji's eye feels like a surrender.

He shouldn't be crying. He shouldn't be, because Fushiguro's not dead, but—but he keeps crying. He can't stop. The tears come fast, and every time Yuuji blinks there's more. Then there's the sound, the noise in his throat, strange and primal-sounding. When Yuuji starts to sob, he doesn't recognise his own voice. It sounds raw and awful and fucking pathetic. It sounds like an animal. It sounds like someone's died.

"Please," he gasps out. Somewhere nearby, Ieiri is still working on Okkotsu, but Yuuji can't bear to look away from Fushiguro for long enough to see if Okkotsu's still alive. "Please, Fushiguro—come on, please, *please—"*

Time starts to move strangely after that. It's somehow both too slow and too fast. Every second is both an eternity and a fraction of what it's supposed to be. Yuuji has been here for too long. Yuuji will never be here for long enough.

Yuuji's carried Fushiguro before. It's been necessary when they're on missions and Fushiguro is either too injured or too slow. Yuuji's never had an issue with carrying him—he weighs

twenty kilos less than Yuuji himself. With Yuuji's enhanced strength, it's like carrying a backpack.

But now, as Yuuji tries to heft Fushiguro's body into his arms, he finds himself bowing under the weight. He can't even get Fushiguro's legs off the ground. He can only struggle to wrap his arms around Fushiguro's torso, his hands slipping on his abdomen where the blood is warm and wet. He lowers his head into the crook of Fushiguro's shoulder, his ear pressed against Fushiguro's neck, and he prays that by some miracle he'll hear a heartbeat. He gets nothing but silence.

At first, the pain is familiar.

Yuuji's felt it before: this crawling, scratching ache behind his sternum, in the space between his lungs. It's the kind of pain that feels like it's alive. It grabs him by the throat and refuses to let go. It hollows him out, makes him feel like a pot in the kiln with too much air left inside him.

He felt this pain when Kugisaki's head exploded in Shibuya. He felt it when Nanami died. He's been feeling it for the last month and a half, ever since he opened his eyes and saw Fushiguro standing in front of him with Sukuna's smile on his face. By now, Yuuji knows what grief feels like, and this—*this* is grief.

But, as he gathers Fushiguro's body into his arms, it starts to get worse.

The pain spreads. It stretches out past his chest, to his head, his hands, his feet. It travels down his spine and out through his nerves. And, suddenly, it's not just an ache anymore—it's a prickling, stinging feeling, like Yuuji's blood is suddenly filled with a thousand tiny glass shards.

He clings to Fushiguro like that will help ward it off. He curls himself over Fushiguro's head, wraps his arms around Fushiguro's shoulders, buries his face in Fushiguro's hair. The copper tang of blood fills his nose and throat, and he chokes on it. But the pain just grows worse—and worse, and *worse,* until Yuuji's breath is coming through gritted teeth.

Then the burning starts.

It's almost unnoticeable, at first. A warmth in Yuuji's stomach, beneath his ribs, to the side of his abdomen. But then it starts growing hotter, and it starts *hurting*—Yuuji has to let go of Fushiguro to press the heel of his palm against it, but that doesn't do anything. God, it—it feels like he's being *branded,* what the fuck—

"Itadori-kun?" Okkotsu says, and he sounds very far away. So he's alive, then. Yuuji makes a stupid little pained groan in response, and it's only then that he realises he's been making sounds this entire time. "Ieiri-san, look—look at him, he's—"

"Itadori?" That's Ieiri. "Itadori. *Itadori!"*

Yuuji doesn't realise he's collapsed onto his side until he opens his eyes and finds himself eye-to-eye with Fushiguro. The pain is excruciating. He's never felt like this before, not even

when he was fighting Choso's brothers and his flesh was literally rotting. Distantly, he hears footsteps, and then there are hands on his shoulders, turning him over. Yuuji's vision switches from Fushiguro to the sky, and he makes a wordless sound of complaint.

Ieiri's face appears in front of him. She looks even paler than normal. "Shit," she mutters. "What—Itadori, *what happened?"*

Yuuji can't answer her. He blinks, and his vision swims. He realises, suddenly, that there are crisscrossing lines of pain all over him—did Sukuna get him when he wasn't looking? Is this the delayed result of an attack? Is Yuuji going to turn into mincemeat, just like that one girl in Shibuya with the phone and the blonde hair?

Ieiri rips at Yuuji's clothes. There's a brief flash of chill as she opens up his shirt, but Yuuji barely registers it. Ieiri's voice sounds like it's coming from underwater as she swears again.

"What is that?" Okkotsu again. He's limped over, it seems, recovered enough that he's no longer on the very brink of dying. "Ieiri-san, those lines—and his stomach—"

"I've only ever seen it in drawings," Ieiri says grimly. "I think he broke a Binding Vow."

"What?"

"Itadori, can you hear me? Itadori. *Did you make a Binding Vow?"*

Yuuji's tongue lies heavy in his mouth. His body is no longer his own. When he starts to twitch, his body spasming erratically, he can hardly feel it. Ieiri's hands are on his shoulders and she's trying to pin him down, but Yuuji can't hear the words she's shouting at him. His jaw hinges open, and a long, terrible scream rips itself out of his throat—

He blinks, and suddenly the sky is gone. Ieiri is gone. Okkotsu is gone. The pain is gone. Everything is gone, but—

But, most importantly, *Fushiguro is here.*

He's here. He's standing right in front of Yuuji, and he's alive. He's okay. He's dressed in his school uniform, and the fabric is clean and unripped. His hair's not matted with blood. His stomach is perfectly whole. And his eyes are open, looking right at Yuuji, just as bright and green as Yuuji remembers.

Yuuji takes in the scene much quicker than he usually would. He's no longer in Shinjuku—he's sitting on the ground, somewhere dark. There's a fire in front of him. Okkotsu sits on the other side of it, in his own body. Fushiguro stands before him, alive and unharmed.

"We just have to save people," Fushiguro says, his eyes boring into Yuuji's. Yuuji stares back at him. "I believe that was the original idea behind your actions."

The air rushes out of Yuuji's chest in one blow.

Ah. He's been here before.

This is a memory. And not just that—this is a memory that Yuuji will never forget. He'll never forget this moment, this heartbeat, the look on Fushiguro's face as he opens his mouth and—

"So start by saving me, Itadori," Fushiguro says, and Yuuji feels the words strike him like a knife to the chest. They split him apart, cleave him in two. The memory freezes around him, a moment paused in time—he stares at Fushiguro's face, open and pleading, and he thinks: *I can't. I'm sorry.*

In front of him, the fire flickers and goes out. Fushiguro is swallowed up by the dark. Yuuji, as always, follows soon after.

Someone's snapping their fingers at him.

"Oi, Yuuji-kun. Now's not the time to be sleeping!"

Yuuji's eyes fly open. He jerks upright and immediately slams his forehead into something solid.

Pain bursts across his brow. "Ow!" he yelps, grabbing his forehead. The person standing in front of him clicks their tongue.

"Well, *that's* not going to help us take down Sukuna," they say, and Yuuji freezes.

He looks up.

Gojo is standing there. He's dressed as he was just a few hours ago, before he left to go and fight. Black shirt, white pants, white haori thrown over his shoulder, and...

No stitches on his head. No stitches on his stomach. Yuuji stares at him for so long that Gojo's smile falters.

"Yuuji-kun?" he asks.

Yuuji. Not *Itadori.* This is—this really is—

"What day is it?" Yuuji blurts out. Gojo's brow furrows even more.

"You didn't give yourself a concussion just now when you hit yourself on Infinity, did you?" he asks. "It's Christmas Eve, Yuuji-kun. I'm about to go kick Sukuna's ass."

About to. He's *about to.* Yuuji looks around wildly and sees the other students there, all looking at him questioningly. They're—they're not in Shinjuku anymore. This is the building that they were using as a base before the fight with Sukuna. Yuuji twists around, scanning the room. Higuruma's here too, and Choso, and—

Yuuji's eyes land on Okkotsu. He's still in his own body, white shirt and droopy black hair and eye bags and everything. He meets Yuuji's eyes, looking vaguely concerned, and tilts his head questioningly.

A dream? Was it all just an awful dream?

But it had felt so *real.* And—and things had unfolded just like this, right before Gojo went off to fight. Everyone had been in this room, just like they are now, and Yuuji had laughed and told Gojo that his technique was getting in the way. The room had looked *exactly* as it does now. Nothing's changed other than the fact that Yuuji is sitting on the floor instead of standing—presumably because he was sleeping, like Gojo said.

Think, Yuuji. Think. Think.

Did he see the future? Is that a cursed technique that he didn't know about?

What happened right before Yuuji woke up here? He was—he'd been holding Fushiguro. He'd had Fushiguro's body in his arms, and it had been the worst moment of his entire life. He'd curled over him, buried his face in Fushiguro's hair, gagged on the smell of blood. He'd felt that strange burning pain in his belly, and then he'd fallen to the ground. Ieiri had called his name. And then...and then...

"Yuuji."

Yuuji jumps. Choso is crouching in front of him, his eyes dark and worried, and *god*—Yuuji very nearly bursts into tears. This is his big brother, alive and well in front of him, and if Yuuji really *did* see the future, then by the time the sun sets tonight he'll be dead. Burnt to a crisp. Yuuji had watched it happen with his own two eyes.

"Yuuji," Choso says again. He puts his hand on Yuuji's shoulder, and the weight grounds Yuuji a little. "Are you alright? Do you need to step out for a moment?"

Yuuji opens his mouth and finds that no words come out. He's just—he doesn't know what's going on. Was he dreaming? Did he have a vision? Or did he actually, literally, travel back in time?

Nothing makes sense. *I think he broke a Binding Vow,* Ieiri had said to Okkotsu as she knelt over Yuuji's malfunctioning body, but that doesn't make sense at all. Yuuji's only made one Binding Vow in his entire life, and it became null and void the second Sukuna left Yuuji's body. Besides, Yuuji never even broke the conditions of that Vow. So why...?

Wait.

Right before Yuuji passed out, he'd remembered Fushiguro. It only makes sense, since his entire world was Fushiguro and Fushiguro was dead, but—

So start by saving me, Itadori.

Yuuji feels his entire body go cold.

That memory. That one specific memory. It had flashed in his mind so quickly, so vividly, that it felt like he was reliving the moment for real. Yuuji can still remember the spark that lit up in his chest when Fushiguro said that. He still remembers the sudden burning determination that had filled him: *yes,* he'd thought to himself back then, as he looked into Fushiguro's eyes. *I'll save you. I swear it. That's my purpose now.*

He never said it aloud, but...

Can Binding Vows be made with yourself? If Yuuji swore it to himself—swore it so fervently, so intensely that he felt it in his soul—would it still count? And, if he broke that Vow, would it have an effect?

He didn't save Fushiguro. He broke his promise. He—

"Yuuji-kuuuun," Gojo sings, snapping his fingers again. "You look like you're thinking very hard. I'm taking offense, you know. It's a big day for me! You're not allowed to be distracted!"

"Sorry, sensei," Yuuji says automatically. He looks up at Gojo, and for a second he can only see the dead body: cut at the waist, blood leaking from his mouth, eyes staring up at the sky. So, before he can second-guess himself, he adds: "Can I talk to you? Alone?"

Gojo's brows climb up his forehead. "...How long will it take?"

"Not long." Just long enough for Yuuji to warn him. To tell him. To save him.

"Then of course! Anything for a precious student." Gojo claps a hand on Yuuji's shoulder and tugs him to his feet. "Come on, Yuuji-kun. This way."

He steers Yuuji into the adjacent room, ignoring the stares of everyone else. Yuuji's hands are trembling at his sides. His head feels fuzzy, like it's stuffed full with cotton.

"So," Gojo says, once they're out of earshot of the others. "Your cursed energy is going a little haywire there, Yuuji-kun. Care to tell me what—"

"IthinkIsawthefuture," Yuuji blurts out. Gojo blinks at him.

"You think you saw the future?" he repeats slowly. Yuuji nods. Gojo's eyes bore into him, like he's searching for a lie and coming up empty.

"Ah," Gojo finally says. "I see. Really?"

"Really," Yuuji says.

Gojo scratches his chin thoughtfully. "Well," he says, eyeing Yuuji. "That's certainly a surprise. Did things work out?"

Yuuji swallows. His eyes burn. He looks down and away.

"I suppose not," Gojo says softly. "I lost?"

Yuuji can't say it. Even now, even after seeing the body for himself, he can't believe it. *Gojo Satoru lost* feels like an oxymoron, and yet—it's true. He nods again.

"He's going to use Fushiguro's big shikigami," he says. His voice comes out wobbly. "The one with the big wheel on its head. I think you called it Mahoraga. It's going to adapt to your Infinity, and he's going to learn how to cut through it, and he'll—he'll—"

His breath starts to stutter. Gojo reaches out and grips Yuuji by the shoulders. Yuuji looks up at him and nearly flinches—Gojo is staring at him, blue eyes burning so intensely that Yuuji feels like he needs to look away.

"Yuuji-kun," Gojo says, his voice low. "As quickly as you can, tell me everything you remember."

Yuuji does.

As Gojo fights Sukuna for the second time, Yuuji sits with the others and waits.

He fidgets with his fingers. Keeps rubbing his thumb over the stub of his left pinky, the one that Sukuna ripped off. Keeps glancing at Okkotsu, too—at how his eyes are fixed on the screen showing the fight, how his mouth tightens every time Gojo is injured. Yuuji didn't notice it the first time around, but there's a certain desperation in Okkotsu's eyes.

This whole time, was Okkotsu planning to take over if Gojo died? Was it some kind of back-up plan that they never told Yuuji about? Right now, is Okkotsu praying that Gojo makes it out so that he won't have to resort to stealing his skin?

At the same time, Yuuji's mind drifts. He turns over those last few moments in his head again and again: Ieiri's words, the unexplained blinding pain, the vivid memory of Fushiguro asking Yuuji to save him. Yuuji glances at Ieiri, standing silently in the corner, and decides to brave it.

He shifts, getting up from the couch and walking over to her. Barely anyone pays him any mind. They're all too focused on the fight.

"Ieiri-san," Yuuji says, and her eyes flicker to him. "What do you know about Binding Vows?"

Her brow scrunches. "Binding Vows? Why?"

"I just..." Yuuji shrugs. "Figured it's better to know than not, right?"

Ieiri sighs. Her arms are crossed, and she's tapping the nails of one hand against the elbow of the other. "I suppose," she says. "I'm not the most knowledgeable on the subject, though. What do you want to know?"

Yuuji hesitates. What *does* he want to know? Well, for starters—

"What happens when you break one?"

Ieiri raises her brows. "Well, it depends," she says. "Usually you die. I've only ever seen drawings in old journals, though." She purses her lips. "Generally, to an onlooker, you'd look like you're getting sliced to bits. I imagine it probably feels like that, too. I think it's meant to be some kind of punishment from the universe, like it's taking you apart or something. But most people aren't dumb enough to break a Binding Vow, so it's rare." She looks at him again, her eyes sharp. "Why do you need to know, Itadori-kun?"

Should Yuuji tell her? Does it matter? Something in him tells him that he should hold back, so he just shrugs again.

"I'm new to jujutsu," he says. "I guess I'm just curious. And, uh, one more thing—is it possible to make a Binding Vow with yourself?"

"Well, yes." Ieiri nods at Miwa, the blue-haired girl from Kyoto. "She made a Vow to never draw her sword again, remember? If you believe something with enough conviction, then of course it'll become a Binding Vow."

"Ah," Yuuji says. His voice sounds dull, even to his own ears. Ieiri's eyes bore into the side of his head, clearly suspicious. "Right. Okay. Thanks, Ieiri-san."

He goes to sit back on the couch.

If you believe something with enough conviction, then of course it'll become a Binding Vow. Yuuji has never believed anything more than when he told himself he would save Fushiguro. In the days after Shibuya, when Yuuji felt like everything he knew about himself had been shattered, it was Fushiguro who made him realise that he could still help people. It was Fushiguro's request that had Yuuji picking the pieces of himself off the ground.

Everything that Yuuji is now is built around that sole purpose of saving Fushiguro. If Yuuji looks inside himself, *really* looks, then he thinks he'll find his love for Fushiguro right at his very core.

So: is it possible that he made a Binding Vow to save Fushiguro? Yes, of course. He'd even say it's likely. No—it's almost certain. He swore he would save him, and then he didn't. He failed. He broke the Vow, and he'd...

Did Yuuji die? He's not sure. Ieiri said that the universe would take him apart for breaking his Vow, and it had definitely *felt* like he was getting diced up back there in Shinjuku. Then there was the matter of that burning in his stomach, too, and—

His stomach.

His *stomach.* Ieiri didn't say anything about a burning pain, only the slicing part. Is that burning feeling why Yuuji got sent back in time instead of just dying? If Yuuji checks his stomach now, then maybe...

He excuses himself to go to the bathroom, then pulls up his shirt to look in the mirror. His breath catches in his throat.

There's a huge mark on his stomach that wasn't there before. It looks like a scar, reddish-brown, but when Yuuji touches it he feels nothing but regular smooth skin. No scar tissue, no gnarly bits. It's like a birthmark, if Yuuji had been born with a giant circle on the left side of his stomach.

...Wait.

The left side of his stomach. Yuuji traces the mark again, trying to recall the feeling of holding Fushiguro's body in his arms, and...and...

Oh.

It lines up perfectly: the mark on his stomach corresponds to Fushiguro's death wound.

The realisation makes bile rise up Yuuji's throat. He braces himself on the sink and forces himself to breathe.

So he's definitely travelled back in time. Or, at least, that first timeline—the one where Gojo died and Okkotsu took his body and Fushiguro was killed by a Hollow Purple to the gut—definitely existed. The proof of it exists as this mark on Yuuji's stomach. He wonders if this is the universe's way of reminding him that he failed: he's branded, permanently, with the mark of how Fushiguro died.

He takes a few minutes to compose himself, then slips back to rejoin the others. Already, he can see that the fight between Gojo and Sukuna is going differently to how it happened the first time round. Gojo has taken the information Yuuji gave him and used it to his full advantage—he's more prepared for Sukuna's attacks, especially now that he knows that Sukuna has a barrierless domain. Yuuji tracks each attack with his eyes. This could be the one. This could be the one that kills Gojo, this could be the one that kills Sukuna, this—

Somehow, when Gojo fires his last Hollow Purple, Yuuji is still caught off-guard.

It's dead silent. In Shinjuku: silence. In the room where the rest of them watch through Mei-Mei's crows like it's some crazy TV show: silence. Yuuji's eyes are fixed on the screen, on that tiny figure that lays where Sukuna fell. He bites down on the inside of his cheek, waiting for Sukuna to get up and the fight to keep going, but...

He doesn't. It doesn't. Sukuna doesn't move. He's curled up with his back to the 'camera', and he shows no signs of getting back up. And the body looks far too small.

Gojo strides forward. He crouches down next to Sukuna, then freezes. He whips his head up, looking right at the closest crow with a terrified glint in his eye. It's almost an exact mirror to how Yuuji reacted, when he realised that Fushiguro...that Fushiguro was...

Oh, Yuuji thinks dully. *It's happened again.*

"Shoko," Gojo rasps out on the screen. Then, with a wild tinge to it: *"Shoko!"*

The silence breaks. Ui-Ui grabs Ieiri and they both disappear, while everyone else breaks out into worried murmurs. One of the crows must fly closer, because as Ieiri and Ui-Ui appear on screen, the 'camera' zooms in to show their faces. Ieiri's face is tight with tension as she kneels down next to Gojo and the body. Gojo's hands are flitting frantically, and he's babbling, the words almost too fast for Yuuji to catch.

Ieiri shoves him out of the way. "Let me work," she says curtly, turning the body over so she can view the face. What little colour was left in her cheeks disappears. Gojo makes a choked sound.

"Shoko, please—I tried to avoid his head—god, fuck, *Megumi—"*

Yuuji was right: it's happened again.

It's a different place this time. The chest, not the stomach, but the wound looks the same. It's still that perfect circle shape, a cookie-cutter chunk of flesh taken out of Fushiguro's body. Yuuji supposes that's just what Hollow Purple looks like when it kills someone. He stares at the screen, at how Ieiri's hands tremble until she just bows her head in defeat, and he knows: he's going to have to do this again.

Sure enough, he's beginning to feel lines of pain tracing over his body. This is the part where he feels like he's being cut up on a chopping board. The burning will start soon, and then—will Yuuji just relive this day, over and over? Until he finds a way to fulfill his promise and save Fushiguro?

The pain grows worse. Yuuji leans forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. Someone asks him if he's alright—Maki, he thinks. He doesn't know. He lets out a long, strained wheeze of a breath.

Now that he's looking for it, Yuuji can feel it: the words are etched into him, woven into his muscles and carved into his bones. *Start by saving me, Itadori.* Yuuji promised he would, so now he must.

The burning pain is starting to come back again. It begins in his chest this time, slightly to the right. Yuuji swallows, reaching up to press his hand against it.

So, he thinks dazedly, as the universe begins to take him apart. *This is what happens when you break a Binding Vow.*

Yuuji wakes up on Christmas Eve. It's morning—early enough that he's still in bed. The first thing he does is press the heels of his hands to his eyes and breathe.

He wasn't even with Fushiguro, that time. He wasn't there. He couldn't hold him as he died, couldn't press their foreheads together, couldn't get one last glimpse of his eyes—

He allows himself sixty seconds to grieve.

Then, after that, he rips off his shirt and inspects his chest. Sure enough, the huge mark on his stomach from Fushiguro's first death is still there, but there's a second one now too: a matching circle on Yuuji's right pectoral. Both are left over from Hollow Purples. It's clear as day that, if Gojo—or someone in Gojo's body—plans to kill Sukuna with that attack, then Fushiguro will not survive.

So, once Yuuji feels like he can face the world again, he sets out to find Gojo. He does the exact same thing as before—he tells Gojo what's happened. He shows him the marks, and something twitches in Gojo's face when he sees the circle on Yuuji's stomach. Then Yuuji puts his hands together, bows as deep as he can without getting on the floor, and begs Gojo to not use Hollow Purple.

"Please," he says, his voice ragged. *"Please,* Gojo-sensei. It'll kill him. There's no way it won't kill him."

Gojo sighs. "Yuuji-kun—"

"Please."

Gojo looks up to the ceiling. There's a long moment of silence.

"I'll try my best," Gojo says grimly. "Believe me, I don't want to kill Megumi either."

Yuuji still remembers the wild look in Gojo's eyes when he saw Fushiguro's body. He remembers the devastation on his face, the terror. If Gojo kills Fushiguro, then he must kill some part of himself, too; if Yuuji tells him now that Hollow Purple is sure to kill Fushiguro, then Gojo will avoid using it unless he has to.

Yuuji spends the next few hours rehashing everything he remembers from both of Gojo's fights with Sukuna. Mahoraga, the barrierless domain, healing their brains with Reverse Cursed Technique to offset the damage of so many Domain Expansions. That other huge shikigami, the one called Agito. Yuuji tells Gojo anything and everything that might help him defeat Sukuna while sparing Fushiguro's life.

Gojo stays true to his word: in this fight, he doesn't use Hollow Purple. He evades Sukuna's attacks instead with the information that Yuuji gave him, and he holds out for long enough that Yuuji starts to gain hope. But then—

Sukuna grins, and it's a grin that Yuuji recognises. His heart drops right to the bottom of his stomach.

Gojo's dragged the fight out for too long. He's given Mahoraga enough time to adapt. Yuuji can do nothing but watch, dread sitting heavy in his chest, as Gojo's Infinity is sliced in two.

It's just like Yuuji remembers: a neat cut right across the waist, severing Gojo into his torso and legs. The shock of it is somehow even worse than the first time. Yuuji stares at Gojo's bloody face, and he realises:

He did that.

He begged Gojo not to use Hollow Purple. *He* asked Gojo to take his most powerful weapon out of his arsenal. This time, it's Yuuji's fault that his teacher is dead.

When Yuuji arrives in Shinjuku, it's with a cold, cold feeling in his chest.

His memory of the first fight is hazy, but he still remembers where things went wrong. They go wrong the same way in this timeline, too. Yuuji tries to warn Higuruma that his Domain will confiscate the wrong thing, but he's too late. Then Okkotsu comes in, fresh from killing Kenjaku, and he opens his Domain.

This, of all things, is what blindsides Yuuji. Because—well, he just didn't expect it. It didn't happen like this the first time around. Okkotsu's Domain had only managed to hold Sukuna off long enough for Yuuji to get a glimpse of Fushiguro's soul.

This time, though, it's different. Yuuji doesn't know if it's because Gojo weakened Sukuna more this time, or if something's simply changed in this timeline, but—

But it works. It works too well. When Okkotsu charges Sukuna, the attack lands, and it *works*.

Yuuji never even gets the chance to speak to Fushiguro. Sukuna dies with Okkotsu's blade buried in his throat, and he brings Fushiguro down with him.

Yuuji wakes up on Christmas Eve with marks on his stomach, chest and throat. At the very least, the one on his throat isn't as obvious—it's a starburst wound in the dip of his collarbone, easily hidden by his clothes.

He tries again. The same strategy, again. He talks to Gojo. To Higuruma, too, since the Executioner's Sword is their best bet at ending the fight early.

This time, he doesn't have to worry about Higuruma. The man never even comes into play. Neither does Hollow Purple. In this timeline, Gojo—already fully armed with the knowledge of the three fights that came before—is too fast in countering Sukuna's Domain. In this timeline, Unlimited Void hits Sukuna full-force.

In this timeline, Sukuna falls quickly, quietly, bleeding from his eyes and nose and ears. Fushiguro doesn't stand a chance.

Yuuji wakes up on Christmas Eve with marks on his stomach, chest, throat and temple. He supposes that's the closest he can get to displaying a brain injury on the outside of his skin.

This time, Fushiguro's not the one who dies first. This time, Yuuji is too slow. He's still clumsy with all his more advanced techniques. His grasp on Reverse Cursed Technique is kind of like a kid trying to hold on to a large, wriggly fish, and he just—doesn't heal himself in time. He's still trying to reconcile what he *thinks* will happen and what's *actually* happening. There are just enough tiny changes to throw him off. Just enough tweaks in the timeline for Yuuji to stumble, for his focus to waver.

That waver is all the opportunity Sukuna needs.

Sukuna laughs when he kills him. He draws it out a little: cuts off Yuuji's hands first, so that he can't use any cursed techniques. Then he slices the muscles of Yuuji's ankles, so that he can't run. Then, finally, he reaches into Yuuji's chest and rips out his dying heart.

"Just like old times, brat," he says, tossing the heart aside with a smile.

Yuuji looks up at him and wonders if Fushiguro is watching. He hopes not. Fushiguro's already had to watch him die once; Yuuji would hate to make him go through it again.

Yuuji wakes up on Christmas Eve with marks on his stomach, chest, throat, temple, and a circle made of five crescent marks right over his heart. It takes Yuuji a few seconds to puzzle that one out, but then he puts his own hand over the mark and realises: it's Sukuna's fingernails.

He needs to be stronger. He needs to be *better.* He can't keep relying on everyone else to do the dirty work for him and miraculously finish off Sukuna without killing Fushiguro. Yuuji clenches his hands into fists and decides that, this time, he won't tell anyone anything at all. He'll bear the burden of knowledge alone.

So: Gojo dies. Kashimo dies. Higuruma dies. Yuuji attacks Sukuna with a fire burning in his chest, grief hardened into rock-solid *rage.* He puts every last bit of power he has into his punches, and it works. It *works.* He chips away at the barrier between Sukuna and Fushiguro's souls, and it's easier than it used to be. He pummels Sukuna with Black Flash after Black Flash. He hits six, then seven, then—

Right before Yuuji lands his eighth Black Flash, Sukuna's body melts away.

"Ita—"

Yuuji's fist lands directly in the centre of Fushiguro's chest.

Fushiguro goes flying. He slams into a nearby building so hard that he goes clean through the concrete. Yuuji stares, his fist still sizzling with black sparks of energy.

No. *No.* There's no way that Yuuji—that *Yuuji* was the one to—

He's running before he can think about it. He stumbles over the ground, and for a stomach-churning second he's right back in that first timeline, that first death. Yuuji tears into the building with his heart in his throat, and there—Fushiguro. It's really Fushiguro, not Sukuna, and he's—he's—

"Fushiguro," Yuuji gasps, scrambling over the debris to get to him. Oh, god, his *spine*—he hit the building back-first, and now his spine is all crooked and bent. Ieiri always says spinal injuries are some of the worst. "Fushiguro, please, no, *please—"*

He bundles Fushiguro up in his arms. Fushiguro's head lolls back limply, and his spine is a knobby line beneath Yuuji's hands, bent out of shape and misaligned. Yuuji feels like he's going to puke. He presses his ear to Fushiguro's chest and almost sobs when he hears a faint heartbeat.

Fushiguro's not dead. Yuuji hasn't killed him. And—and Sukuna is gone, so does that mean —?

Fushiguro stirs. Yuuji snaps his head up to stare at him.

His eyes are red.

Fushiguro smiles. He stretches, and his body fixes itself, vertebrae popping back into place. He reaches up and pats Yuuji's cheek.

"Thanks for that, brat," he says. Yuuji stares, horror unfurling in his chest, as Sukuna's tattoos begin to form on Fushiguro's face. "You've just made it ten times easier for me, destroying Fushiguro Megumi's soul like that. I don't think even *I* could put it back together after that kind of hit."

Oh god. Oh, *god.* Yuuji hit Fushiguro. Yuuji hit Fushiguro with a Black Flash, and he *only* hit Fushiguro. He as good as tore the last remnants of Fushiguro's soul apart with his own two hands.

Yuuji buries his face in his hands and *screams.*

He's barely aware of Sukuna, who untangles himself from Yuuji's hold and stands with a sigh. "You truly never cease to be annoying," the curse says. "Trust me, brat, I'm doing us all a favour by shutting you up."

He cuts out Yuuji's tongue first, then the rest of his vocal cords. To his shame, Yuuji doesn't even try to resist.

Yuuji wakes up on Christmas Eve—

"That's enough," Fushiguro says, after his seventh death.

Yuuji only sees him for a moment. It's the span of a breath, a heartbeat—a single second where Yuuji sees into Fushiguro's soul.

What he sees breaks his heart just as badly as it did the first time.

Fushiguro is folded forward on his knees. His face is to the ground. Here, in this dark, cold space, Yuuji wants nothing more than to go to him and pull him up, but he's rooted to the spot.

Technically speaking, this is Fushiguro's innate Domain. So the reason why Yuuji can't approach is simply because Fushiguro doesn't *want* him to approach. Because what Fushiguro wants is to—

"I've had enough," Fushiguro whispers. His voice echoes around them. "Please."

What Fushiguro wants is to die.

Unfortunately for him, Yuuji can't accept that.

Yuuji releases a single shaky breath. He looks at Fushiguro, who he loves like the first falling of leaves in autumn, and he feels like he's holding his entire world in his hands and he's about to drop it. He feels like he's breaking something fragile and precious. He's failed Fushiguro, over and over—his body is littered with the scars of Fushiguro's deaths. He's killed the person he holds most dear.

"I'll come back for you, Fushiguro," Yuuji tells him quietly. "I won't give up on you."

There's no response. *Please, look at me,* Yuuji begs him silently. *Please, please, let me see your eyes, let me see you as I remember you.*

Fushiguro doesn't lift his head. When Okkotsu's Domain shatters, ending Yuuji's tiny window of time, the last thing Yuuji sees of him is his hair: dark and inky and shifting with an underwater current that doesn't really exist. Yuuji loves that hair. He's always found it cute, the way it sticks up every which way. He hopes this isn't the last time he ever sees it.

Maki's blade pierces a heavily-weakened Sukuna through the chest. Yuuji feels it like a strike to his own heart.

Death number eight, then. He'll try again.

There is no version of the fight where Gojo wins without killing Sukuna, and there is no version where Fushiguro lives without killing Gojo. Yuuji realised this early on, but he hadn't wanted to accept it. After all, Gojo's the strongest. If he can't do something, then that must mean it's impossible, and Yuuji—

Yuuji can't accept that saving Fushiguro might be impossible. He refuses. He'll tear the world down and rebuild it if he has to, but he'll save Fushiguro. He *will.*

He just has to stop Gojo from fighting Sukuna in the first place. That will never end well. At the very least, one of them will die. So Yuuji has to stop the fight. And to stop the fight, he has to go back further. He's been waking up on Christmas Eve ever since Fushiguro's first death, but maybe—?

This time, when Choso is too slow to save Yuuji from Sukuna's fire, Yuuji closes his eyes and thinks.

Go back to before this day. Go back further. Go back earlier, to before this all started—

The fire consumes him whole. Yuuji wonders, distantly, what mark this will leave.

Yuuji blinks himself back into consciousness and finds that he's wearing a bathrobe.

"...I'm talking to you, Itadori."

Oh.

Yuuji's heart leaps in his chest. His knees nearly buckle with relief. He turns around, hardly daring to believe it.

Fushiguro is sitting there in the hotel bed. He looks like himself, and he has no markings on his face. His eyes are green. Yuuji very nearly weeps at the sight of it. His hands shake, threatening to spill the water in the wine glass that he's holding.

Yuuji knows exactly when to place this night: November 14th, two days after he and Fushiguro joined the Culling Game. Two days *before* Sukuna carried out his plan to possess Fushiguro. They're in an abandoned hotel with Kurusu and Takaba. Kurusu is standing at the edge of Yuuji's vision, but he barely sees her. Everything he knows zeroes in on Fushiguro: alive, unpossessed, and mostly unhurt.

"Itadori?" Fushiguro says again, narrowing his eyes. "Are you...okay?"

Yuuji reaches up to touch his face, just to make sure that his scars from Sukuna are still there. And they are, they *are*—one scar beneath each eye, the telltale marks of his status as Sukuna's

vessel. Those scars had disappeared after Sukuna moved to Fushiguro, which means...

It worked. It really worked. Yuuji went back to before Christmas Eve, before everything went to hell. *He can save Fushiguro.*

He realises, abruptly, that he's crying.

"Itadori?" Fushiguro looks alarmed now. He's throwing his covers back, even as Kurusu yelps and tells him to be careful. "What happened? Is everyone okay?"

Everyone *will* be okay, now that Yuuji's made it to this point in time. The wine glass slips from his fingers and shatters on the floor, but Yuuji doesn't care. Fushiguro's striding rapidly across the room towards him now—Fushiguro, alive, *alive*—

Yuuji sinks to his knees and *sobs.*

Fushiguro kneels in front of him. "Itadori—"

Yuuji grabs him and pulls him in for a hug, so tight that Fushiguro lets out a strangled wheeze of a breath. He'll never take this for granted again. He'll never go another second without admiring the miracle of having Fushiguro exist alongside him. He clings to Fushiguro and buries his face in his shoulder.

"Fushiguro," he gasps out, clutching Fushiguro's arms, his shoulders, every dear part of him that Yuuji's lost ten times over. *"Fushiguro.* You're okay."

"...Yes," Fushiguro says slowly. He reaches up and squeezes Yuuji back, tentative. "Was I out for that long?"

Yuuji nods his head, then shakes it, then gives up on answering that question properly and just holds Fushiguro tighter. They stay like that for a bit, until Yuuji's calmed down enough that he can breathe without hiccuping, though he doesn't let go of Fushiguro. He doesn't plan on ever letting go again.

When Yuuji draws back, he finds Fushiguro looking down at him with pure worry in his eyes. Of course—he probably thinks someone's dead. Yuuji stares at him and commits every line of his beautiful face to memory.

From here, he knows exactly how to proceed. He knows how to save Fushiguro. He can fulfill his Binding Vow.

"Fushiguro," he rasps out, taking Fushiguro's hand in his own and squeezing it so hard that Fushiguro winces. "Fushiguro, listen—you have to kill me. You have to kill me *now."*

Chapter End Notes

- if you've read to the end of this first chapter: hello and thank you for giving this fic a chance! if you love yuuji, i apologise. i also love yuuji, but he's going to go through it. things are only going to get worse for him from here.

- megumi's first death wound, the one caused by yuuta's hollow purple, is almost perfectly identical to toji's (hence gojo's reaction to seeing the mark on yuuji). also, the last death in shinjuku (the fire) leaves a burn mark on Yuuji's left palm. he just didn't notice.

- i already have the rest of the fic outlined, so i'll hopefully be able to post at least one chapter every week (or two weeks, depending on my schedule and brain juice levels). once again: DON'T WORRY! THIS FIC HAS A HAPPY ENDING!

- chapter title is of course from robert frost's famous poem 'the road not taken':
"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
...
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back."

- fic title is from hozier's 'talk'. for this fic, i specifically was thinking of the first verse (where 'the devotee' is orpheus):
"I'd be the dreadful need in the devotee
That made him turn around
And I'd be the immediate forgiveness
In Eurydice
Imagine being loved by me"

Chapter 2: you’re coming back (and it’s the end of the world)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For what feels like forever, Fushiguro just stares.

They're still kneeling on the floor, their arms wrapped around each other. The hotel carpet scratches against Yuuji's shin where his pant leg has ridden up. A pin could drop in the silence.

Then Fushiguro says, "Are you stupid?"

Yuuji gapes at him. "Huh?"

"I said, *are you stupid?"* Fushiguro demands. He lets go of Yuuji—Yuuji feels the loss like the amputation of a limb—only to swat him upside the head. Yuuji yelps. "I already told you that's not happening. Will you just shut up about it?"

"Shut up?" Yuuji says incredulously. Fushiguro sits back on his heels, crossing his arms across his chest. He looks wholly unimpressed, like they're not talking about a matter of life and death. *"Shut up?* You—*Fushiguro!"*

"Itadori," Fushiguro mimics mockingly, wrinkling his nose. Yuuji's never seen him act this petty. "I'm not helping you with your dumb suicide plan. Now get up so we can talk about what to do next."

Then he just—gets up. He unfurls his body and gets to his feet, easy as breathing. Yuuji lurches forward on instinct and grabs his sleeve.

"Fushiguro!" he splutters again, because—what? *What?* How can Fushiguro just move on so easily? How can he just live his life so carelessly when Sukuna's just waiting for the right moment to strike? "I'm serious!"

"So am I." Fushiguro yanks his sleeve out of Yuuji's grip. "Just drop it, Itadori. I won't do it." He looks over to Kurusu, who's watching them slightly awkwardly. "...Who are you?"

Something complicated flickers over Kurusu's face before she composes herself. "I'm Kurusu Hana," she says, nervously smoothing her sweater down. She keeps looking at Fushiguro and then glancing away. "I found you outside, unconscious, and brought you here."

"Be nice, Fushiguro," Yuuji says automatically, because Fushiguro is eyeing Kurusu with enough suspicion to put a biased police detective to shame. Fushiguro turns that flinty stare on Yuuji instead, and Yuuji can't help but cringe like a little kid caught lying.

"You still haven't told me how long it's been," Fushiguro says accusingly. "Or who's dead."

"No one's dead!" Yuuji says quickly.

"Then why'd you hug me like that?"

"I'm just glad to see you!"

"You see me all the time, you weirdo!"

"Yeah, but it's not enough!" Yuuji argues, and he doesn't realise how it sounds until Fushiguro makes a little 'urk' sound and quickly turns away. Kurusu's eyes are flitting between them, her brow slightly furrowed. Yuuji coughs and gets to his feet.

"You've been out for two days," he tells Fushiguro. "It's the night of the fourteenth right now. No one's dead. Oh, and we're friends with that comedian guy, too. He said he helped you."

Fushiguro wrinkles his nose. "The half-naked guy?"

"That's the one."

"...I see," Fushiguro says, in a tone that implies he would like to stop seeing. He folds his arms, glancing over at Kurusu. His eyes linger on the halo above her head, the snowy white wings that protrude from her back.

"Kurusu," he says shortly. No honorific or anything; that's how Yuuji knows his patience is wearing thin. "Itadori and I are looking for a player called the Angel. Is that you?"

Just like Yuuji remembers, the Angel's mouth opens on Kurusu's cheek. "That's me," they say, and Fushiguro's shoulders go tense.

They move the conversation to the couch after that. Takaba comes bursting in with snacks, and Fushiguro recoils a bit at the sight of him. Fushiguro and the Angel go back and forth for a bit on the Angel's abilities and what the sorcerers need them to do. Yuuji zones out for a bit —he's heard all this before, after all—until he feels Sukuna stir.

He tunes back into the conversation just in time to hear the Angel say, "Just one player in particular."

Oh—that's right. The Angel will help them on one condition. And now, as they open their mouth to speak, Yuuji remembers what that condition was.

The realisation is like finding an oasis in the desert. Yuuji feels a massive weight lift off his chest. This is perfect. He doesn't need Fushiguro to kill him, not when the Angel is right here and wants nothing more than to—

"The Disgraced One," the Angel says. Fushiguro doesn't react—but, of course, why would he? He doesn't know. "If we kill that player, then I promise I'll help you."

Yuuji can feel Sukuna preparing to speak to him. He doesn't think he can handle seeing Sukuna's face without immediately trying to kill him, so he cuts him off by leaning forward, bracing his elbows on his knees.

"The Disgraced One?" he repeats. Somewhere in his soul, Sukuna pauses, faintly surprised. "You mean Sukuna, right?"

Fushiguro snaps his head around to stare at him. Kurusu stares, too. The Angel huffs out a breath. In the corner, Takaba munches on stale konbini chips.

"Yes, that's right," the Angel says, their tone making it clear that they find Yuuji's knowledge suspicious. "Ryomen Sukuna is a blight upon this earth; he goes entirely against natural law. If you help me kill the player who houses him, I'll unseal your sensei."

Fushiguro is staring at him. Yuuji can feel it. He knows what Fushiguro is thinking. He's probably cussing Yuuji out inside his head, telling him *don't do it, don't do it, don't you dare do it...*

Yuuji does it.

"You're in luck, then," he says, "because—"

Fushiguro kicks him under the table, hard. Unfortunately for him, Yuuji was born with a superhuman body. He doesn't even flinch.

"—I'm Sukuna's vessel," he finishes. "You can kill me if you want."

In the silence that follows, Fushiguro makes a sound. It's a tiny, desperate, involuntary thing: an exhale of breath, like he's been blindsided by an unexpected attack. Yuuji only hears it because he's sitting so close. When he dares to glance over, he finds Fushiguro staring at him with something like anguish in his eyes.

"Itadori," he says, so quiet that Yuuji nearly misses it. Yuuji's throat constricts. He swallows past it.

This will save him, Yuuji reminds himself. He looks away from Fushiguro and meets Kurusu's gaze instead.

Kurusu is staring at him, her eyes wide. On her cheek, the Angel's mouth is firmly shut.

Then: "Prove it," the Angel says. Yuuji shrugs.

"Well, I'm not going to let him take over my body, for obvious reasons," he says. "But if he wants to co-operate, he can manifest on my face or my hand just like you."

Sukuna does nothing. He says nothing. He retreats into some crevasse in Yuuji's body and doesn't make a sound. That's to be expected—there's no way he would ever help Yuuji on anything, not even this.

"Why should we believe you?" the Angel asks. Kurusu hisses something at them, but they ignore her. "Why should I believe that you truly house Sukuna within you?"

"Why would I lie?" Yuuji asks. Fushiguro reaches over and grabs his arm in a vice grip.

"Itadori," he says again. His voice cracks. Yuuji doesn't react. He can't let himself react. If he looks at Fushiguro now, openly pleading for Yuuji to stop, then he just might give in.

The Angel makes a thoughtful sound. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to try killing you," they say. "If you're telling the truth, then I get my wish. If you're not...well, I don't see a downside to that, except for you."

"Exactly," Yuuji agrees, ignoring the increasingly frantic way that Fushiguro shakes his arm. "Can we do it now?"

"Itadori!" Fushiguro barks, giving up on not being conspicuous. He reaches across and grabs Yuuji's other arm, forcing Yuuji to turn around to face him. "What the *fuck* is wrong with you?"

Yuuji takes one look at him and has to look away. Fushiguro looks—*devastated* is the only word that comes to mind. His eyes dart over Yuuji's face like he'll find an answer somewhere between one scar and the next. His hands tremble where they hold onto Yuuji's arms. His mouth moves without any words coming out—it's rare for Fushiguro to be rendered speechless.

Yuuji can't look at him without wanting to crumble. So he looks down at his feet instead, ignoring how Kurusu and Takaba both watch. He tries to offer Fushiguro a grin, but it comes out as more of a grimace.

"It was always going to happen," he says. He's trying to soothe Fushiguro, but Fushiguro's face just darkens even more. "Scheduled execution and everything, remember? I'm just...moving things up a bit."

"You don't wish to wait until after I help you unseal Gojo Satoru?" the Angel interrupts.

Yuuji opens his mouth to say no, but Fushiguro beats him to it—"*Yes,"* he says instantly, before Yuuji can respond. "We're waiting until after you unseal Gojo-sensei. Aren't we, Itadori?"

His voice is forcefully calm. His grip on Yuuji's arm is bruisingly tight. When Yuuji looks over at him, he finds Fushiguro looking at him sidelong, his jaw clenched tight.

Ah. They're going to have to talk about this.

"Uh, sure," Yuuji says. "We'll wait until after."

That's a lie. He's already thought about it: he has to die before Fushiguro realises what's happened to Tsumiki. It's inevitable, at this point, that Yorozu will reveal herself—but if Yuuji dies before that happens, then Sukuna won't be able to take advantage of Fushiguro's pain to possess him. That means that Yuuji has to die either today or tomorrow.

But Fushiguro won't let that happen. Yuuji knows that for a fact. So, for now, Yuuji will go along with it. He'll give Fushiguro some false security, make him think that he has a few days

to talk Yuuji out of it—and then, when Fushiguro's not expecting it, Yuuji will have to go behind his back and die.

He doesn't like deceiving Fushiguro, but it's necessary. He'll talk to the Angel about it tonight.

Kurusu and the Angel look between them. "Very well," the Angel says. "We'll speak more on the topic then."

Kurusu chews on the inside of her cheek. Her eyes linger on Fushiguro and his dark expression. "Surely we don't *have* to kill Itadori-kun," she murmurs. "Can't we just—?"

"If he's Sukuna's vessel, it can't be helped," the Angel interrupts bluntly. Yuuji can't help but feel a rush of relief. It's unbelievably lucky how the Angel just so happens to want to kill Sukuna—this really is perfect for him.

They end the conversation there, with a standing agreement for Yuuji's execution. Kurusu excuses herself to go and speak to the Angel alone in the next room over. Takaba goes out to the balcony to practice his 'new material', leaving Yuuji and Fushiguro alone.

The second the balcony door slides shut behind Takaba, Fushiguro is turning to Yuuji. "You *idiot,"* he hisses, grabbing at Yuuji's arms again. "Why did you say that? Why would you—how could you—"

"Fushiguro, listen to me," Yuuji says. He reaches up and wraps his fingers around Fushiguro's elbows, so that they're grasping each other's forearms in some bizarre handshake. "Sukuna's going to kill you. What he wants to do to you—Fushiguro, it will *kill you.* Do you understand?"

What Yuuji means is: *do you understand that you dying is the worst case scenario, Fushiguro? Do you understand that?*

"I don't care about Sukuna," Fushiguro snaps. "You can't just—you won't *die,* Itadori. I won't let you."

Yuuji wants to scream. He wants to rip his hair out. He wants to grab Fushiguro by the shoulders and shake him like an omikuji box at the temple until a stick falls out that reads, *Yuuji is right. You're in danger. You're an idiot for not caring.*

"Fushi-*guro,"* he says, his frustration leaking through into his voice. "I'm trying to *save* you—"

"What part of *you dying* will save me?" Fushiguro demands. "You said Sukuna will kill me if you live—so what? If you die, that'll kill me too!"

And that—well, that—

How can Yuuji *not* look at him, after something like that?

So Yuuji looks. He peeks up and finds Fushiguro looking at him like he's already dead. It nearly makes Yuuji's resolve crumble. For a second, he thinks: *if I just avoid him, won't it work? If I'm not near him, can't we both survive?*

But he's already tried that. He knows that, if he tries to avoid Fushiguro, Fushiguro will chase after him like the stupid, idiotic, beautiful boy that he is. Fushiguro's loyalties lie with very few people, but he'd follow any of them to the ends of the earth.

Yuuji's never wished for someone to stop loving him before. It's an awful feeling. He never wants to feel it again.

He sighs, running his thumb over the curve of Fushiguro's arm. He's got pointy elbows—good for jabbing people. "Look, we've got time to talk about it," he says. The lie sits like ash on his tongue, powdery and inedible. "At least the Angel will help us now, right? And once Gojo-sensei is unsealed, he can help us work out a solution."

Fushiguro eyes him suspiciously. By now, he has to know Yuuji well enough to know that he's probably lying. "We'll hold off on this until after Tsumiki's out of the game and Gojo-sensei's unsealed," he says firmly. "We'll figure something out, Itadori. The Angel won't kill you. *Nothing* will kill you. Promise me."

Out on the balcony, Takaba bursts into laughter at his own joke. The sound is muffled through the glass door. Yuuji, unable to bear the intensity of Fushiguro's eyes, looks over at Takaba like he's the most interesting thing in the world.

"He's a few slices short of a sandwich, isn't he?" Yuuji says, in a flimsy attempt at a distraction.

"Itadori," Fushiguro says. He moves his hands from Yuuji's forearms to his shoulders, pulling Yuuji in closer. "Promise me that you won't do anything stupid until we get Gojo-sensei unsealed."

"I promise," Yuuji says softly. He doesn't hesitate with his answer. He *can't* hesitate, or Fushiguro will know something's up. But he keeps his eyes fixed on Takaba as he says it—he can't lie to Fushiguro's face. Not like this.

"You won't get yourself killed before we unseal Gojo-sensei," Fushiguro repeats, because he thinks Yuuji has the intelligence of a dog. "Promise?"

"I already promised!" Yuuji says indignantly.

"Promise again!"

"That makes it feel less important!"

"Not to me," Fushiguro snaps. "Just say it, Itadori."

Yuuji looks at him. Fushiguro's eyes are fixed on Yuuji's face, dark and focused; Yuuji's heart stumbles a little at the sight.

Yuuji puts a hand to his chest. He focuses his gaze on Fushiguro's nose instead of his eyes, so that he can say these next words without immediately folding and confessing to the lie.

"I promise, Fushiguro," he says, as raw and honest as he can make it sound. Fushiguro finally relaxes. His hands slip from Yuuji's shoulders; Yuuji misses the contact instantly.

On the balcony, Takaba bursts into another fit of laughter. Yuuji knows it's not the case, but he still can't help but feel like the man is laughing at him.

Mere hours after making his promise to Fushiguro, Yuuji breaks it.

He sneaks out of bed quietly. He's sharing it with Fushiguro, who had all but dragged Yuuji into it with him when he realised Yuuji was planning to sleep on the floor; Yuuji has to be extra-careful as he draws the covers back and slips out on socked feet. Just to be sure, he triple-checks that Fushiguro is asleep before he tiptoes over to Kurusu.

She's sleeping in the armchair in a little ball, her knees pulled up to her chest. Yuuji reaches out to tap her shoulder, praying that she's a light sleeper.

The Angel's mouth opens on her cheek before Yuuji even touches her.

"As I suspected," they murmur, as Yuuji freezes like a deer in headlights. "You don't want to wait, do you?"

Yuuji swallows. "You could tell?"

The Angel huffs out a dry laugh. "Of course," they say. "You're far too eager to die, Itadori Yuuji. I could spot you lying a mile away. Now, give me a moment to wake up Hana, and we can go get this over and done with before your friend over there wakes up."

Kurusu's eyelids flutter open moments later. To her credit, she doesn't scream when she sees Yuuji leaning over her—her eyes widen a bit, but she's quiet. The Angel must fill her in on what's happening, because she silently uncurls from the armchair and waves her hand to get Yuuji to follow her.

When Yuuji pauses at the door, it's a moment of weakness. He tells himself not to look back or falter, but...

But he can't help himself. He just needs one more look.

So he glances back, just for a second. Just for a heartbeat. Fushiguro sleeps curled on his side, with his hands tucked neatly under his head; the moonlight gilds his hair and turns it blueish-silver. Yuuji lets himself have a total of ten seconds to drink in the sight of him before he turns away.

Kurusu leads him to the roof. The Angel explains that Jacob's Ladder is highly destructive; it can't be performed indoors. Kurusu draws a chalk circle on the ground, just large enough for one person to stand in, and steps back.

"That circle will be the strike zone of my technique," the Angel explains from the back of Kurusu's hand. "Defining the zone beforehand will help me concentrate my power and ensure that we kill Sukuna. But be warned, Itadori Yuuji—once I begin the technique, I cannot stop it, and no one can go in or out of the strike zone. If you step into that circle, then you will die."

Yuuji breathes in. Breathes out. It's warm, for a November night; he closes his eyes for a moment to feel the breeze on his skin.

For what it's worth, he'd liked being alive. He got to live in a place where he could see both sun and snow. He ate good food. He heard good music. He met good people, and he loved them, and he thinks they loved him back. For now, at least, Yuuji can believe that that's enough.

He steps into the circle.

There's a soft whoosh of air, a sudden ripple of faint pressure against Yuuji's skin—outside the circle, Kurusu flinches. She hasn't said a word since she woke up, but Yuuji can tell from her pinched expression that she disapproves of this. She's probably thinking of Fushiguro, who will wake up in the morning to find that Yuuji betrayed him. Yuuji swallows back the thought and reaches out to test the circle's boundaries instead.

His hand hits an invisible wall when he tries to reach over the circle's border. Trapped, just like the Angel said.

"Last chance to back out," the Angel says, twisting Kurusu's hand in a grabbing motion. A four-winged trumpet, brassy and gleaming, appears in Kurusu's palm. She grips it with trembling fingers.

Yuuji takes a deep breath. On the eastern horizon, there's the faintest pale yellow glow; the sun is beginning to rise.

After this, Fushiguro will finally be safe. That's all the encouragement that he needs.

"I'm ready," he says.

"Very well," the Angel says. Kurusu shuts her eyes, her mouth trembling, as the Angel lifts the trumpet to her mouth. Kurusu blows it once. It makes no sound.

Then the Angel opens their mouth.

"O Radiance," they intone, and a prickle goes down Yuuji's nape, "Radiance which purifies all things..."

It's like turning on a spotlight. A bright pool of white light appears in the circle that Yuuji's standing in; he looks up and finds that it's beaming down from the sky itself.

"...evil, sin and misery, extinguish them all..."

It's raw power. It reminds Yuuji of Gojo or Okkotsu, even though it's nowhere near as oppressive. It even has a sound, like the soft whirring of a huge machine. Yuuji braces himself for impact as it gets louder, taking on a rhythmic beating sound that gets closer by the second.

"...guide them, o Radiance, to the right path..."

Wait.

That beating sound isn't from Jacob's Ladder. No, Yuuji *knows* that sound, that rhythm. That's —

Yuuji recognises the footsteps mere seconds before the door to the roof slams open.

"Itadori!"

Fushiguro looks wild. His hair is a mess, his clothes in disarray. In the harsh light of Jacob's Ladder, his skin is washed-out and pale, like a corpse in the morgue. His eyes, wide and horrified, lock onto Yuuji's.

Yuuji doesn't even get the chance to say anything before Fushiguro leaps forward.

"Hana, grab him!" the Angel barks. Kurusu lurches forward with a squeak and wraps her arms around Fushiguro's torso, dragging him back from the circle. Fushiguro makes a guttural sound, a wordless yell that tears at Yuuji's heart, thrashing against her grip. The Angel must be bolstering her strength, because Kurusu's arms just wrap tighter.

Normally, Fushiguro would summon his shikigami. Normally, Kon would already be out by now, attacking Kurusu from behind to force her to loosen her grip. But Fushiguro's clearly not thinking straight—he struggles against Kurusu's grip desperately, but he doesn't try to strategically wriggle his way out like he usually would. He barely even looks at Kurusu. His eyes are fixed on Yuuji, and on the steadily-growing light of Jacob's Ladder.

"Itadori!" he shouts again, his voice breaking. *"Itadori!"*

And Yuuji, deep down, is weak. When Fushiguro reaches out for him like that, he can't help but reach back.

His hand moves almost on its own. He stretches it out towards Fushiguro—to do what, he doesn't know. Hold his hand? Wave goodbye? Prove to Fushiguro that, even though he lied and broke his trust, Yuuji still wants to reach out to him at the end? He's not sure.

In the end, it doesn't matter. His hand hits the invisible barrier, and for some reason, that makes Fushiguro freak out even more. Yuuji watches him struggle against Kurusu's grip, feeling oddly distant and detached.

Yuuji is going to die, and Fushiguro will watch it happen. At this point, that's a fact.

Kurusu's speaking. Yuuji can barely hear her over the whirring of Jacob's Ladder. "Stop it!" she yells, and it takes Yuuji a second to realise she's talking not to him, or to Fushiguro, but to the Angel. "Stop it, *stop it,* you're hurting him! *Call it off!"*

But the Angel can't call it off. They can't stop the technique; they said as much earlier, before Yuuji stepped into the circle. Above Yuuji's head, the light becomes so bright the whole world seems to be black-and-white. He has to squint to make out Fushiguro's face.

"Jacob's Ladder!" the Angel shouts.

The pillar of light crashes down with a sound like thunder. Yuuji blinks, and the world disappears. A flash of heat, a blinding brightness—that's all he knows before he's gone. He doesn't even have time to process the impact.

It's surprisingly painless. Or, at the very least, it would've been painless, had it not been for Fushiguro.

Yuuji might not be able to see anything when he dies, but he can still hear. Over the thunder of Jacob's Ladder, over Kurusu's shouts for the Angel to stop, there is the sound of Fushiguro screaming his name.

It's the worst sound Yuuji's ever heard.

Yuuji opens his eyes.

...He shouldn't be able to do that.

It takes a second for his vision to adjust. He's mid-walk—he stumbles a little, trying to figure out where he is, and someone catches his arm.

"Oi," Fushiguro says, and Yuuji's heart jumps up into his throat. He squeezes his eyes shut for a moment. "Don't tell me you're hurt or something and you didn't tell anyone about it."

"No, I'm fine," Yuuji says automatically. His voice, miraculously, comes out steady. "Just tripped."

Fushiguro says nothing, but the silence still feels skeptical. He lets go of Yuuji's arm, though, leaving Yuuji free to surreptitiously look up.

He and Fushiguro are walking at the back of a familiar group: the two of them, plus Okkotsu, Choso, Maki and Tsukumo. That last member is what lets Yuuji pinpoint this moment in time, because the last time he saw Tsukumo, it was when they were in the Tomb of the Star.

Yuuji glances around. They're walking through what *looks* like a dead forest, but Yuuji remembers this place. It's the cursed warehouse just above the Tomb, which means they must

be on their way to go see Tengen. And if they're on their way to see Tengen...

They haven't entered the Culling Game yet. They haven't met the Angel yet. And speaking of the Angel—that clearly didn't work out. If Yuuji is here, even further back in time than before, then the only explanation is that he's broken his Vow yet again. He failed to save Fushiguro *again.*

Just in case, Yuuji reaches up to feel for his scars. Yes, there they are—he's still Sukuna's vessel. Fushiguro is still Fushiguro.

Why didn't it work? Fushiguro was fine—Yuuji had made sure of it. He'd been alive when Yuuji died. He was fine, he'd lived, and Sukuna was gone, so why...?

If you die, that'll kill me too!

...Fushiguro didn't mean that literally, right?

No. No, surely Fushiguro wouldn't. He *wouldn't.* He wouldn't kill himself just because Yuuji was gone.

Would he?

No, that's stupid. Fushiguro would grieve, sure, but he wouldn't *kill* himself. He wouldn't throw his life away just to follow Yuuji into death. Yuuji sneaks a glance sideways, at where Fushiguro walks calmly beside him.

They've lagged a bit behind the rest of the group. Well, Yuuji's lagged; Fushiguro's just slowed down to match his pace. Yuuji judges the distance between them and the others and deems it far enough that he can risk having an embarrassing conversation.

"Hey, Fushiguro," he says. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Hm?"

"If I died right now, what would you do?"

Fushiguro stops dead in his tracks. *"What?"*

"Hypothetically!" Yuuji says hastily, throwing up his hands.

"Why would you even ask that?" Fushiguro demands. Up ahead of them, Maki glances back, her brow furrowed. "Did something happen?"

"No, nothing," Yuuji says, tapping the back of Fushiguro's ankle with his foot to get him to start walking again. "I was just thinking about it, I guess. Since the higher-ups ordered my execution and everything."

Fushiguro squints at him suspiciously. These days, it feels like all Fushiguro does is squint at him suspiciously. This is only Yuuji's second alternate timeline with a non-possessed Fushiguro, but he's already tired of lying to him.

They walk a bit further before Fushiguro speaks again. "It depends on how you die, I guess," he finally says. "Like, if you were killed by that sorcerer in Kamo Noritoshi's body, then I'd focus on getting revenge. If you were killed by someone else because of Sukuna..." His eyes linger on Okkotsu's back, and the blade strapped across it. That's right—Yuuji had asked Okkotsu to kill him, hadn't he? "...I don't know. But I'd be mad at you."

"You'd be mad at me for dying?" Yuuji says, offended.

"No, I'd be mad at you for being an idiot and getting yourself killed," Fushiguro corrects.

"That's the same thing!"

"So you admit you're an idiot?"

"You're impossible," Yuuji says, but he has to bite back a smile. Of all things, *this* is what he's missed most—these tiny insignificant moments where Fushiguro had let himself act less serious around Yuuji and Kugisaki. "So you'd go to my grave and yell at me? Desecrate the dead?"

Fushiguro tilts his head back, examining the tree branches above them. "No," he says thoughtfully. "I'd figure out wherever you went after you died. Then I'd find you and beat you up."

It's stupid, but Yuuji feels some nameless emotion rising up his throat. He feels like he'll choke on it, on all these *feelings* he has for Fushiguro—affection, desperation, frustration. It's all one big mess inside him. If he dies, Fushiguro will kill him. If he dies, Fushiguro will care enough to find him again, even if it's just he can hit Yuuji upside the head.

"What if I asked to die?" Yuuji says quietly. Fushiguro turns his head sharply to look at him, but they don't stop walking. "What if—what if I died to save you? Because Sukuna was going to kill you?"

"Then I'd be even angrier," Fushiguro says instantly, his voice turning cold, "because that's even more stupid. If Sukuna wants to kill me, then so what? He wants to kill everyone. Besides, if you die, that'll kill me too."

Yuuji's heart stops for a second. He stumbles again, and Fushiguro grabs the back of his shirt to keep him upright.

"Seriously, Itadori, you—"

"What does that mean?" Yuuji blurts out. There's a tiny scrabbling panic at the back of his mind, because he knows, he *knows* that Fushiguro doesn't mean that literally, but...

But what if?

He's said it twice now, in two different timelines. That must mean that it's something Fushiguro truly believes: if Yuuji dies, then it will kill Fushiguro too.

Yuuji has to ask. "When you say that it'll kill you, you don't mean, like..."

He lets his voice trail off. Fushiguro stares at him for a moment, uncomprehending, before his eyes widen.

"What—not like *that,* idiot," he hisses, swatting Yuuji over the head. "I just meant, you know, figuratively. You're my best friend. If you die..."

He falters. Yuuji looks over and finds Fushiguro looking at his feet. A faint pink flush dusts the tops of his ears.

"...You're important to me," Fushiguro mutters, hunching his shoulders like it physically pains him to bare this much emotion. "Right now, you and Tsumiki, you're both..."

He doesn't finish his sentence, and Yuuji doesn't push him. The conversation is left there, in the middle of a long-dead forest, to disappear forever into Tengen's maze of ever-changing illusions. But Yuuji doesn't stop thinking about it, not even as they find the elevator to the Tomb and descend further underground.

Yuuji knows how much Fushiguro loves his sister. She's everything to him. Her death broke him so badly that he couldn't fight back against Sukuna. And to know that Fushiguro holds Yuuji in that same regard...

Oh.

He broke Fushiguro's heart, didn't he?

If that other timeline still exists, then in it, Fushiguro is mourning him. Fushiguro is *grieving.* This whole time, Yuuji's only ever thought about saving Fushiguro's life—he'd never considered that it could break Fushiguro to lose him too. He'd never thought that maybe, to Fushiguro, watching Yuuji die is just as bad as being possessed by Sukuna. If Yuuji takes off his shirt, he's sure he'll find a mark left over from Jacob's Ladder, because he broke his Vow to save Fushiguro the second he let himself die.

Ugh. Now things are *complicated.* Why couldn't Fushiguro have loved him less?

Yuuji's stuck at a crossroads now. He can't die because Fushiguro loves him, but he can't live because he loves Fushiguro. No matter what he does, he'll ruin Fushiguro for life. No matter what he does, he cannot save him.

Come on, Yuuji. Think.

The universe wouldn't have thrown him into this situation if it was impossible to save Fushiguro. Yuuji can't save him after Sukuna possesses him, and he can't save him once the Culling Game starts either, because at that point, Sukuna is already waiting to set his plan into motion. Once the Culling Game begins, the only way to ensure Fushiguro lives is for Yuuji to get himself killed—and, clearly, Fushiguro won't tolerate that.

So Yuuji has to eliminate the threat. He can't get rid of Sukuna, but he *can* make sure that Sukuna's plan is never carried out.

It was only after Shibuya that Sukuna had solidified his decision to possess Fushiguro. Yuuji knows that he'd been thinking about it for a while, at least since the detention centre, but *something* happened in Shibuya that convinced Sukuna it was time to take action. Yuuji doesn't know what it was—Sukuna had carefully blacked out that part of his memory—but...

But if he goes back to Shibuya and stops Sukuna from ever taking over his body, then won't that work just as well?

He'll delay Sukuna inevitably. He'll make it so that there's never a perfect moment for Sukuna to take over Fushiguro's body. He'll prevent Sukuna's massacre in Shibuya, and he'll save Fushiguro, and he'll save all the civilians he murdered to boot. He'll save *Kugisaki.* Nanami. If he can, he'll even try to make it so that Gojo never gets sealed.

In this timeline, he's already too late. Shibuya has happened, and the Culling Game has started. It's only a matter of time before either Yuuji or Tsumiki dies. This timeline can't be fixed, so...

So Yuuji has to end it.

The thought of it is daunting. The only way for him to jump to another point in time is for either him or Fushiguro to die, and he's sure as hell not killing Fushiguro—so Yuuji has to figure out a way to kill himself. An uncomfortable churning starts in the pit of his stomach. This will be the first time he's died on purpose, just to get another go. It feels awful, like he's treating everyone's lives as a plaything, but he knows it's necessary.

For someone who's got about a billion different things trying to kill him at once, Yuuji struggles a bit with coming up with an idea. His first thought is Okkotsu, obviously, but...

But if Yuuji asks Okkotsu to kill him, then Fushiguro will bear the guilt forever. That's just how he is. Yuuji hates it, thinks it's irrational—but Fushiguro will know that Yuuji died to save him from Sukuna, and he'll never let it go. Yuuji doesn't want to put Fushiguro through that. Yuuji *can't* put Fushiguro through that.

So Okkotsu is out. The Angel is out. Yuuji needs to make it look like he died against his will—he needs to make it look like he died in a fight against someone who would be expected to kill him. Like the higher-ups, or one of the Culling Game players, or...

"I require two of you to stay behind as my guards," Tengen says, and a lightbulb goes off in Yuuji's head.

...Or Kenjaku.

So this is how it goes: Yuuji volunteers to be Tengen's bodyguard. Everyone looks at him like he's crazy, especially Fushiguro—after all, Tengen hadn't even asked him.

But Yuuji insists, and maybe Tengen can tell that he's not from this timeline, because they study him for a moment before they agree, and Tsukumo is chosen as the other guard. Fushiguro argues against it—he grabs Yuuji's arm, his fingers digging into Yuuji's bicep.

"I thought we were in this *together,"* he hisses, and Yuuji's heart splinters a little further at the look on his face: confused, mostly, but also a little angry. To him, of course, it must look like Yuuji's going back on his word.

"We are," Yuuji assures him. "Don't worry, Fushiguro. I'll come find you when this is over. I'm not leaving you alone."

It's a lie in this universe, but silently, Yuuji makes it a promise to himself: he won't leave Fushiguro alone. At the end of all this, no matter how things turn out, he'll make sure Fushiguro's not alone.

Fushiguro is silent for a second. He opens his mouth, then shuts it, then looks away.

"Just remember," he finally mutters. "If you die, I'll—"

"I know."

Fushiguro huffs. "Good. Don't forget it."

He and the others leave soon after that. Choso takes a bit of coaxing, but just like Fushiguro, Yuuji eventually convinces him that they'll see each other soon. It's another lie, of course; Yuuji waves Fushiguro and Choso off as they leave and knows that, at least in this world, he will never see them again.

Then he turns to Tsukumo.

"Tsukumo-san," he says, pressing his hands together and bowing as deep as he can, "please kill me and tell the others it was Kenjaku."

For a long moment, Tsukumo is silent.

"Well," she finally says, raising her brows. "Sure, if you want. But you've got to give me a good reason."

So Yuuji does. Tsukumo's not surprised at all when he reveals he knows the future—she barks out a laugh, tossing her head back.

"I knew you were hiding something," she says, chuckling. "You didn't strike me as the type to want to hide out in some dusty old tomb while your friends do all the hard work." She elbows him lightly. "So what are you, a psychic? Does something awful happen to me and this old geezer if you're not here to stop it?"

Yuuji swallows, looking down at his feet. "I, uh...I asked to stay for selfish reasons, actually," he says quietly. Shame burns hot at the back of his throat. "Sukuna's planning something involving Fushiguro. I need to die to keep him safe, but...I didn't want him to feel guilty about it."

Tsukumo nods sagely. "I see, I see," she murmurs, stroking her chin. "Fushiguro's the one with the spiky hair, right? Argued when you said you wanted to stay?"

"Yeah."

"Mm, thought so. Alright, Itadori-kun." She claps a hand on his shoulder, looking down at him solemnly. "I'll help you. And I promise that Fushiguro will never find out how you died —or, at least, he won't find out from me."

Yuuji's knees wobble a bit with relief. Tsukumo is one of just three Special Grade sorcerers left in the world—if she says she'll kill him, then she'll kill him. He looks up to thank her, and —and he remembers, suddenly, that she will die.

Does something awful happen to me and this old geezer if you're not here to stop it?

Yes. Yes, something awful *does* happen. Yuuji knows what happened to Tsukumo in the first timeline. He still remembers the haunted look on Choso's face every time he recalled their fight with Kenjaku.

If Yuuji plays his cards right, then maybe he can save people other than Fushiguro, too.

So he gives Tsukumo a quick rundown of what he remembers Choso telling him about Kenjaku's technique. Tsukumo listens along intently. She doesn't even question it when Yuuji tells her that Kenjaku's Domain doesn't have a barrier, even though, up until Shinjuku, they'd all thought it was impossible.

"Gravity and a barrierless Domain, huh?" Tsukumo murmurs to herself. "Damn. It's like the bastard was built for fighting me and Tengen. Ugh, what a pain..."

She stretches her hands above her head, then looks down at Yuuji. "Well, Itadori-kun, thanks for the info," she says. "Still wanna die?"

Yuuji takes a deep breath. "Yes, please."

"Okay!" Tsukumo says cheerfully. She reaches out to pat his head. "Don't worry. I'll tell everyone you went out in a super badass way. You can rely on me, Itadori-kun!"

She winks at him. Yuuji's starting to see how Todo turned out the way he did, with this woman as his mentor. Then again, maybe Todo's just Todo.

In the end, Tsukumo gives him a choice: to get punched so hard she breaks all his bones, or to get stabbed clean through by her shikigami's pointed tail. Yuuji chooses the shikigami, just because it seems faster. Tsukumo nods, squaring her shoulders.

As her shikigami slithers into view, Yuuji bows his head.

"Thank you, Tsukumo-san," he says quietly, entirely sincere. "Really, thank you."

Tsukumo smiles. It doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"No need to thank me, Itadori-kun," she says. Behind her, her shikigami aims its tail at Yuuji's chest. "Seriously, don't. Now hold still."

She's kind to him. She makes it quick.

Yuuji opens his eyes in Shibuya station.

He's slumped in a stairwell, his back to the wall. The first thing he does is jolt upright, slapping a hand to his face to check for wounds—when he finds his face clean and unscarred, he has to choke back a sob. If he's not wounded, then that means Sukuna hasn't taken over yet. He still has time.

Slowly, Yuuji gets to his feet. He can't tell what time it is right now, but if he's in Shibuya station, then Gojo's already been sealed.

Yuuji pushes down the growing dread in his chest. He'd been hoping to get here before the sealing, but even if Gojo's already out of the picture, he can still change everything. He can't help but feel a spark of—excitement? Hope? He's not sure what to call it.

Shibuya had been the night that everything went wrong. Now, Yuuji's got the chance to fix it. As he continues down the stairs two at a time, he draws up a list of things he has to do: firstly and most importantly, he has to make sure Sukuna doesn't take over, so that Fushiguro will be safe in the future. Secondly, he has to kill Mahito before Nanami and Kugisaki die.

The thought of getting to see them both alive again makes Yuuji dizzy. When the stairs beneath him turn into an escalator, he stumbles, half-jumping and half-falling down. He hits the bottom of the escalator at a weird angle, and his leg buckles, making him crouch down awkwardly.

It's for this reason, and this reason alone, that Choso's first attack doesn't take his head clean off.

"Piercing Blood!"

Oh. Yuuji forgot about this part.

It's so strange to see Choso looking at him like that—with pure rage, his eyes narrow with sheer murderous intent. Yuuji gapes at him for a second. It's *Choso*, after all. Even as Choso raises his hands in Yuuji's direction, preparing to send another stream of blood his way, Yuuji's brain is still thinking *good* and *safe* and *brother*.

So Yuuji does the only thing he can think of: he throws out his hands and yells, *"Aniki, wait!"*

Even when it's coming from a total stranger, Choso still falters when he hears *aniki.* Just instinct, probably, after a hundred and fifty years of defining himself as the eldest brother. His hands, pressed together for Piercing Blood, stall in the air for a moment—a moment that Yuuji seizes.

He tackles Choso around the waist and sends them both sprawling to the ground. "Aniki!" he shouts again. Now that the shock's worn off, Choso's face twists with pure rage, his pale skin flushing a splotchy purple. "Choso—Aniki—wait, wait, *stop,* I'm your brother—"

"You dare mock my brothers like this?!" Choso roars. He wraps one of his arms around Yuuji's neck in a crushing headlock that cuts off Yuuji's breath. Yuuji gasps, scrabbling uselessly. Instinctive panic flares in his chest. "You dare call me aniki? You *murdered my brothers, Itadori Yuuji!"*

"Choso—"

"How do you know my name?!"

"I'm your brother!" Yuuji yells. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Choso raise a dagger made of blood. "Choso, please—*you've been working with your father!"*

Choso freezes for a moment. Yuuji can hear the high-pitched whirring of the blood knife in his hand, the sound of liquid being spun at a speed so fast it could cut bone.

"My father," Choso starts, his voice hoarse and trembling with barely-suppressed rage, "is dead and rotting. How *dare* you—"

"That curse user with the stitches!" Yuuji blurts out frantically. "He's Kamo Noritoshi! He's a sorcerer who steals bodies—please, Choso, you have to believe me—"

"I'll kill you," Choso hisses. "You kill my brothers, then accuse me of working with my monster of a father—*I will kill you, Itadori Yuuji."*

Yuuji tries to wrestle out of Choso's grip, but he can't move. If he gave it his all, he could do it, but...

But it's his big brother.

A second later, when Choso brings down his knife, Yuuji does the only thing he *can* do—he twists so that the knife goes through his shoulder instead of his neck. Then he takes advantage of Choso's lowered arm to break free. He scrambles away as fast as he can, ducking behind a wall and assessing his options.

He's not Fushiguro. He's not the best at forming strategies on the fly. But he knows what worked last time, to get Choso to realise Yuuji was his brother: he'd felt Yuuji almost die.

It's a stupid, terrible, awful plan. If it goes wrong, then Choso will kill Yuuji for real this time. But Yuuji has to try anyway, because he *needs* to walk out of this fight conscious. If he doesn't, then Sukuna—Sukuna will—

When Choso attacks him again, Yuuji lets it happen.

He doesn't raise his arms. He doesn't try to dodge. He lets Piercing Blood hit him straight through the gut. It's like being shot through with pure fire, but—

But it's just pain. And if it's just pain, then Yuuji can push through.

He looks up. Choso is white in the face—well, he's always white in the face, since he's so pale, but now he's staring at Yuuji like he's witnessing the worst moment of his life. Slowly, he sinks to his knees beside Yuuji, and Yuuji reaches out to seize his sleeve.

"You can feel it, right?" he asks desperately. "Do you believe me now?"

Choso opens his mouth, then closes it again without saying anything. His eyes flit from Yuuji's wound to his face. One of his hands comes up to press against his own abdomen.

Then, slowly, Choso nods.

It costs Yuuji a precious half-hour to get himself up and moving again. He's figured out that, with the experience of his future self, he can use Reverse Cursed Technique, though it's slow and inefficient. It leaves him exhausted, but he manages to heal himself well enough to start hobbling around without having to worry that he'll pass out and die.

What time did he find Nanami? Yuuji doesn't remember—he doesn't wear a watch. He knows that he'd found Nanami in a different part of Shibuya station, but he doesn't know how to get there from underground, so he decides to go through the streets instead.

When Yuuji found Nanami, he'd been somewhere near the Dogenzaka exit. Yuuji knows that for sure, so he starts heading in that direction. Choso hovers awkwardly next to him—he still seems like he's in disbelief, but he's also unwilling to harm Yuuji, so Yuuji's going to count it as a win.

In the original timeline, Yuuji's fight with Choso left him out of commission for long enough that Sukuna was able to take over. Now, as they walk side-by-side through the streets of Shibuya—streets that Yuuji had reduced to dust the first time this night happened—Yuuji can't help but feel hopeful. Just by avoiding his fight with Choso, he's already changed the playing field and made it near-impossible for Sukuna to come out. Maybe he really *can* do this.

Fushiguro, he thinks to himself. Fushiguro's a constant in his head now—every beat of Yuuji's heart echoes his name, and every time Yuuji blinks he sees his face on the insides of his eyelids. *You'll be safe soon. I promise. I won't break my Vow.*

Right after he finishes the thought, every light in Shibuya goes out.

Alright, so it's not *every* light in Shibuya, but it's every light that Yuuji can see. They all just—stop working. They don't even flicker. It's like all of them had their power cut at the exact same time.

At Yuuji's side, Choso tenses. He turns his head sharply, searching for something. Yuuji follows his gaze to the Shibuya 109 building, which towers over its neighbours; in the sudden darkness, its red sign glows ominously bright.

"Something's happened," Choso mutters. "An enormous amount of cursed energy just appeared over there."

A chill goes down Yuuji's spine. "Kenjaku?"

Choso shakes his head. "I don't recognise it," he says grimly, turning away from Shibuya 109. "We shouldn't go in that direction. We'll die."

"It's that bad?" Yuuji quickens his pace a little—Choso's purposefully striding away from Shibuya 109 now, and his longer legs make him faster than Yuuji's normal walking pace. "Shouldn't we go over, then? What if there are people in trouble?"

"With that amount of energy? They're already dead," Choso says curtly. The words strike some soft and tender place just beneath Yuuji's ribcage. He swallows, looking over at Shibuya 109; it's like a lighthouse in the blacked-out city, calling to him. A beacon for whoever's at the mercy of the thing that's got Choso so scared. Yuuji wracks his brain, but in the original timeline, he'd been unconscious during this part of the night—he has no idea what's supposed to be happening right now.

Maybe it's one of Kenjaku's plans. A precursor to Uzumaki or something. Yuuji turns away from Shibuya 109, ignoring the neon red sign, and tries to swallow the feeling that he's forgotten something important.

A scant few minutes later, Choso relaxes. "It's gone now," he says. "Whatever it was, it's been exorcised. Or it chose to disappear."

That's a good sign, right? If there was a huge curse, then it's good that it was exorcised, because that means the sorcerers are still fighting. Yuuji's opening his mouth to answer when he sees it: a familiar station exit.

He remembers that exit. He remembers stumbling into it, half-dazed, after waking up from Sukuna's rampage.

He'll find Nanami down there.

He's running before he can think about it. Choso shouts his name and chases after him, but the sound of blood roaring in Yuuji's ears drowns him out. His heart is beating double-time—if he gets there faster, just a few minutes faster, then he can save Nanami. He *can.* He just has to stop Mahito from touching him. Yuuji flies down the stairs, every step jarring his barely-healed wound from Choso, and—

Just like the first time, Yuuji rounds the corner to see Nanami's back.

Mahito is there. Mahito is there, but his hand isn't touching Nanami yet—his hand is still in the air. *His hand is still in the air.* Yuuji stumbles forward, his eyes fixed on those five pale

fingers, as Choso comes thundering in after him.

"Yuuji, what—"

"Hm?" Mahito glances over his shoulder. His eyes flit from Choso to Yuuji, widening slightly with surprise. "Choso! You found him after all!"

Yuuji swallows, glancing up at Choso. Choso doesn't look back. His eyes are trained on Mahito, on that splayed palm that's a hair's-breadth from Nanami's back. His mouth is a thin line.

With his free hand, Mahito curls a finger and beckons Choso over. "I don't know why you haven't killed him yet, but you'll get a kick out of this," he says. "Watch, he'll go crazy."

He leans forward. For a second, Yuuji's entire field of view narrows down to a single point: Mahito's hand, about to touch Nanami's back. He can't get his legs to work fast enough. He steps forward—lurches—stumbles. Nanami's head turns ever so slightly, meeting Yuuji's eyes through his mop of disheveled blond hair.

A clap rings out through the station.

Todo, Yuuji thinks instantly. It's a little earlier than he thought, but with Todo here, he can beat Mahito again. He braces himself for a swap, but instead—

"Piercing Blood," Choso says coolly, and Mahito's hand disconnects from his wrist.

Yuuji stares. Mahito stares. The severed hand hits the ground with a squishy thud and stays there, unmoving. Piercing Blood cuts straight through the gap between Nanami's back and Mahito's stump of a wrist, a dark red line that slices the station stairs in two with a screech of metal. Choso loosens his hands, and the blood releases, splattering across the station platform. Some of it hovers in the air as tiny bubbles. Yuuji thinks, ridiculously, that they look like floating Christmas baubles.

"Eh?" Mahito says, still staring at his own severed hand. "Cho—"

Yuuji surges forward and punches him right in the gut.

Mahito, caught off-guard, goes flying into a nearby pillar. Blood spews from his mouth. "You —!"

"Supernova," Choso says calmly, and those little floating bubbles of blood explode like bombs. Yuuji remembers the feeling of being hit by those, like a sudden uppercut to the chin. He ducks under Mahito's flailing arm, tackles Nanami around the middle, and flattens them both to the ground.

Mahito gets hit with at least three of Choso's Supernovas. He lets out an ungodly shriek, stumbling back, clawing at the places where the blood splatters him. Yuuji wraps his arms around Nanami and drags him away, struggling to get him to a part of the station where he can hide him long enough to kill Mahito—any moment now, Mahito will reshape his body

and heal from his wounds. Right now, he's rolling around and wailing, but any moment now. Yuuji needs to be prepared.

...Any moment now.

Mahito lets out a gurgling scream. "What did you *do?!"* he screeches, digging his fingers into his shoulder. The skin there is bloodied, and steam rises from it with an awful hissing sound. *"CHOSO, YOU BASTARD! WHAT DID YOU DO?!"*

"Did you forget, Mahito?" Choso asks. He steps in between Mahito and Yuuji, and he sounds almost *bored.* "My blood is poisonous to the essence of cursed spirits." He pauses for a second, then raises his hands again. Yuuji can only see his back at this angle, but from the look on Mahito's face, Choso's gearing up for a point-blank Piercing Blood. *"All* cursed spirits."

Mahito giggles. It sounds deranged. "So," he slurs, his eyes darting from Choso to Yuuji to Choso again. "You're a traitor now, are you?"

"I've always made it clear that my loyalty is to my brothers alone," Choso says coldly. "Yuuji included."

Mahito just stares. Then his face twists into a horrible imitation of a smile. "Brothers, huh?" he murmurs. "Ha. What a joke."

In Yuuji's arms, Nanami stirs. "Itadori-kun," he grunts. "You...should run. While they're fighting among themselves."

"I'm not leaving you, Nanamin," Yuuji says firmly. Nanami closes his eyes.

"Itadori-kun—"

"Nanamin," Yuuji grits out. His voice feels like an animal struggling to get out of his throat. "Just—please. Let me handle this." He swallows and thinks of another Nanami, one who'd smiled as he died. "I've got it from here."

Nanami lets out a great exhale. It's more of a sigh than anything else; he sags in Yuuji's arms, like Yuuji's released him from a terrible burden. Yuuji panics for a second, but Nanami's still breathing—it's laboured, but it's there.

He's badly burned. Yuuji needs to get him to Ieiri as soon as possible. He peeks out at where Choso and Mahito are still fighting. Mahito's got a manic glint in his eye, his teeth bared—Yuuji knows that he's now hellbent on killing Choso the same way he was hellbent on killing Nanami and Kugisaki. Choso's aligned himself with Yuuji, so Choso must die. That's how Mahito's brain works.

For a second, the pure hate that rises in Yuuji's chest makes him feel like he's on fire.

He sets Nanami down and jumps into the fray. He's brought Mahito to his knees before, and he'll do it again. He *has* to do it again. Mahito can't kill him with Idle Transfiguration, so Yuuji attacks again, again, *again*—

Beside him, Choso cries out. Yuuji whips his head around just in time to see Mahito retracting his hand. Choso stumbles back, gritting his teeth—there's a wound in his upper arm that's bleeding sluggishly and charred around the edges.

That's when Yuuji realises: Choso can be hurt by Idle Transfiguration too.

It makes a cold shiver of fear go down his spine. That just means there's one more loved one here for Mahito to kill. Yuuji snaps back to attention just in time to dodge Mahito's next attack. He balls up his fist, looking for an opening—

A set of familiar black spikes explode from Mahito's chest, and Yuuji feels like a flower seeing the first of the spring sun.

Kugisaki. Somewhere out there, she's working her magic. She's creating the exact opening that Yuuji needs. She's *alive.*

Yuuji feels himself grin.

"Choso," he says, and his voice comes out breathless. "Take Nanamin to Ieiri-san. She's at the Shibuya toll booth on Shuto Expressway Route Three."

"Yuuji—"

Yuuji turns. He flashes Choso a smile.

"I'll be okay," he says, and for once it's not a lie. "Take Nanamin and go."

Choso hesitates, but whatever he sees in Yuuji's face must convince him, because he hefts Nanami's unconscious body into his arms and takes off. Yuuji turns back to Mahito, who's still gagging on his own blood, and swings his fist directly at the curse's head.

Last time, Kugisaki's Resonance alone wasn't enough for Yuuji to take out Mahito in time. But this time, with Choso's blood burning holes in Mahito's skin, with the old grief that Yuuji still carries for deaths that have been undone, Yuuji *makes* it be enough.

Mahito dies like a dog, crying and snivelling at Yuuji's feet in the middle of Shibuya station. Yuuji stands over him and watches him dissolve back into nothing. He's half-expecting Kenjaku to step out and absorb Mahito again, but Kenjaku's nowhere to be seen; he probably doesn't realise that Mahito's dead yet.

Without Mahito, Kenjaku can't use Idle Transfiguration—and without Idle Transfiguration, he can't begin the Culling Game. Yuuji's not stupid enough to think that Kenjaku doesn't have another contingency plan kicking around, but for a second, he just lets himself stand there and breathe.

He's done it. He's *done it.* He's made it out of Shibuya with as little casualties as possible. All they need to do now is unseal Gojo, and everything will fall back into place.

Then—

"Oh, come *on,"* a familiar voice complains, echoing down the station hall. Yuuji freezes. "Is he already dead? I wanted to see it happen!"

When Yuuji turns around and sees her, alive and whole and with two working eyes, he has to take a minute to sit down and cry.

Kugisaki calls him a baby. But she doesn't shove him off when he grabs her and pulls her into a crushing hug, so he takes that as a win. The two of them make their way to Ieiri's emergency infirmary side-by-side, and Yuuji can't stop feeling like he's going to explode from relief.

Kugisaki's here. She's alive. Once they find Fushiguro in the infirmary, the three of them will be together again, and the Culling Games can't begin. Maybe *this* is how Yuuji saves Fushiguro—by preserving this part of their lives as best he can.

He ducks into the infirmary, waving a quick hello to Choso, who hovers near the door. Ieiri is working on Nanami in the back. Her eye bags look leagues darker than normal, but she glances over when they enter, which means that Nanami isn't on the brink of death. She gives them a curt nod—*good to see you're alive*—before going back to work.

Yuuji instinctively looks to the third bed on the left. That's where Fushiguro had been last time—Yuuji still remembers tearing into the infirmary, his heart in his throat, and collapsing with relief when he found Fushiguro almost entirely unharmed.

But that bed is empty. Yuuji blinks.

"Where's Fushiguro?" he asks, looking around. He sees Ino, Ijichi, Nitta, Nanami, Maki, the old Zen'in clan head...but no Fushiguro.

Ieiri looks up sharply. "Fushiguro?" she asks. "I haven't seen him. Does he need medical attention?"

What?

No, that's not right. Yuuji stares at Ieiri, uncomprehending. Fushiguro's meant to be here. The first time this night happened, Fushiguro had been right here with Ieiri. He'd been with Ieiri, because...because...

Yuuji feels all the blood drain out of his face.

Fushiguro had been with Ieiri because Sukuna brought him here.

Oh, *fuck.*

Earlier, before he found Nanami, there had been that surge of cursed energy near Shibuya 109. Something immensely powerful, there and gone again in minutes—that had to have been Mahoraga. That had to have been—

Yuuji turns on his heel and runs.

Kugisaki shouts his name in alarm. Choso tries to grab him. Yuuji ducks away and *sprints.*

He heads straight for Shibuya 109.

Some part of him is still holding out hope. *Please,* he thinks. *Please, please, please—*

He rounds a corner and stumbles over a body.

It's not Fushiguro. It's the blond curse user, the one with the side ponytail and the creepy sword. Yuuji remembers him well—he was the first corpse that Yuuji had seen after Sukuna relinquished control of his body.

This time, it wasn't Sukuna that killed the curse user—and Yuuji can't believe he's saying it, but he thinks Sukuna might've been kinder than *this.*

The curse user is lying face-down on the pavement. His skull is caved inwards, completely crushed; the ground around him is a crater. He clearly got punched by something incredibly powerful. Yuuji feels sick to his stomach.

He walks past the curse user and turns a corner. The Shibuya 109 sign glows crimson in the dark. And there, beneath it—

Fushiguro is slumped against a metal door. His legs are splayed out on the ground in front of him, his hands lying limp by his sides. His head lolls forward, his chin to his chest; the metal behind his head is crumpled and dented inwards from a huge impact. There's a starburst blood splatter right where Fushiguro's head is.

Yuuji knows, even as he runs towards him, that Fushiguro is dead.

He tries to wake him up anyway. He brushes Fushiguro's hair back from his forehead, combs through the drying blood. He calls Fushiguro's name, over and over. He takes Fushiguro's chin in his hands and tilts his head up so that the light falls on his face. He pleads with him. Begs him. Touches his forehead to Fushiguro's and asks him to *please wake up.*

By the time Kugisaki and Choso catch up to him, Kugisaki demanding an explanation, Yuuji has already cried himself dry.

Kugisaki makes a choked sound when she sees whose body he's holding. Choso is silent, hovering awkwardly. Yuuji ignores them both and clutches Fushiguro closer.

Fushiguro's death is his fault.

It's not an indirect death. It's not a result of Yuuji telling someone the wrong information, or of Yuuji simply slipping up. No—this time, the death was caused directly by Yuuji's actions.

He never gave Sukuna the chance to take over his body, so Sukuna didn't kill anyone. No innocents, no civilians, no sorcerers, no curse users. He didn't kill anyone, but he didn't save anyone either. And during that first night in Shibuya, the one that only Yuuji remembers, there had been one person—just one single person—who Sukuna had saved.

Tonight, no one in Shibuya has died at Yuuji's hands—no one, that is, except for the one that Yuuji wanted to save the most.

So: in this timeline, Yuuji saves Kugisaki. He saves Nanami. He saves every innocent non-sorcerer in Shibuya. But all of it comes at the cost of Fushiguro, dead in his arms, and somehow it feels like it's not fair.

One life in exchange for thousands should be an easy trade to make. But Yuuji, deep down, is a little bit more like Mahito and Sukuna than he would like to imagine. Deep down, in the part of himself that he's ashamed of, he thinks he might choose Fushiguro over the world.

This time, when the pain comes—a delayed piercing-hot impact to the back of his head, the echo of Mahoraga's punch—Yuuji goes out with a plan.

The plan is this:

He'll keep jumping back further. Surely, at some point, there has to be *some* key moment that he can change. Some crucial decision, some butterfly-wing-flap moment that decided Fushiguro's fate. Yuuji will go back to that point in time and change it.

Shibuya is clearly too complicated to fix. It's like Shinjuku—too many things happened in too short of a timeframe. There are too many moving variables for Yuuji to be able to confirm the safety of everyone he loves.

So Yuuji goes back to before Shibuya. Trying to decide where he ends up in each timeline is a bit of a hit-or-miss—if he thinks about it, *really* thinks about it in the moment before he dies, then he can approximate a general time period. But it's like that first time he found himself in Shibuya again: he can't control the exact time. He can make himself go back to October 31st, but he can't decide if he wakes up at eight in the morning or ten at night.

At first, he tries going back a few weeks before Shibuya. He warns Gojo of Kenjaku and the body that he inhabits. Gojo, as always, believes him without question—the jujutsu world goes into lockdown, and everyone prepares for the massacre that Yuuji says will take place.

Yuuji discovers this early on: he cannot stop Gojo from being sealed.

It doesn't matter how many times he warns him. It doesn't matter how many weeks Gojo knows in advance. As long as Kenjaku is in possession of Geto Suguru's body, Gojo will be sealed. Yuuji doesn't know who Geto Suguru actually *is,* but he knows that Gojo must have a history with him. A long history, or at the very least a strong one—strong enough to ensure that, no matter how prepared he thinks he is for the Prison Realm, Gojo will always fall to the trap of remembering.

Once Gojo is sealed, the rest of Shibuya follows like dominoes. Yuuji watches the people he loves slip through his fingers like water, and with each new timeline, he goes back further. He has a few months' worth of events to pick and choose from, so he just lets the universe take him where it will. And yet—and yet—

Every time, he makes things worse.

His plan is to go backwards from Shibuya, picking through each major incident one by one. The latest that he remembers is the Yasohachi Bridge incident, so he jumps back to a few weeks before the mission and starts there. It's refreshingly easy—he just sneaks out of school one night and catches a taxi to the bridge. He's not sure if it'll change anything in the long run, but at least Fushiguro won't have to worry about Tsumiki.

Everything goes just like Yuuji remembers. Choso's brothers don't show up, so the job goes infinitely easier. He lops off the many heads of the Yasohachi curse, keeping an eye out for the main Special Grade that Fushiguro had fought.

Then he hears footsteps behind him.

He whips around, his fists already raised, just to come face to face with Kon.

For a second, Yuuji just stares. Kon stares back, then makes a low *boof* sound and nudges Yuuji's nose with its own. It moves aside to reveal its master, who is *absolutely one-hundred-percent* not meant to be here.

This isn't meant to happen. This never happened in the original timeline. Yuuji's completely out of his depth. He gapes at Fushiguro—who, he notes, is still dressed in his pajamas. Did he get out of bed for this?

"You—what are you doing here?" Yuuji hisses.

"What are *you* doing here?" Fushiguro demands, looking pissed. He holds up his phone, which is open to the tracking app that Gojo made them both install; an icon with Yuuji's face blinks cheerfully on the map. "Why the hell are you here in the middle of the night?"

Yuuji can only stare. Fushiguro followed him. Fushiguro *followed him.* "I thought I felt something funny," he says weakly, because what the hell else is he supposed to say? "Look, Fushiguro, I—"

He's interrupted by the clean *snap* of Fushiguro's neck.

Yuuji had come to exorcise the curse early. In fact, he came to exorcise it before the official reports of it even came in. Fushiguro has not lived the future—unlike Yuuji, without the reports from the school, he has no idea what the curse can do. When the Special Grade's hand wraps around Fushiguro's throat from behind, he's totally blindsided.

Yuuji's a fast runner. He's still not fast enough. The Special Grade giggles to itself and tosses Fushiguro's limp body aside—his head hangs at an unnatural angle, his spine entirely broken.

When Yuuji exorcises the curse, he's screaming. Fushiguro stares at him from the ground, his mouth parted in a slight expression of surprise. As the curse's Domain dissolves around them, Yuuji clutches Fushiguro's body to his chest and waits for the universe to collect him.

The feeling of being cut up and the burning pain at the nape of his neck are both familiar and welcome. Yuuji closes his eyes and buries his face in Fushiguro's hair. He realises, with a start, that apart from the unique situation in Shibuya, this is the first time he's seen Fushiguro die in a situation that he originally would've survived.

It's the first time. Yuuji finds out soon after that it will not be the last.

He goes back to the Exchange Event. He warns the school about Mahito and the forest curse's approaching attack, and the event gets put on hold. The students and teachers get spread out to protect the school and the cursed warehouse.

Yuuji gets put in some remote part of the forest, a shrine that barely anyone knows about. He's mostly there just so he can be kept away from the action, because he insisted on being placed as far away from Sukuna's fingers as possible. Which would've been fine, if Fushiguro hadn't then insisted on being with Yuuji.

It makes Yuuji go all warm and fuzzy inside, but it also makes him want to smack Fushiguro for being a colossal idiot with zero self-preservation skills. He should know by now that being around Yuuji brings nothing but trouble.

"You should go help Todo guard the warehouse," Yuuji tells him, as they sit in the sun and wait for something to happen. "You'd be really helpful."

"So would you, and you're here," Fushiguro counters, like the petty little jerk that he is. Yuuji groans and drops his face into his hands.

"Look," Fushiguro says snappishly, "if you don't want to be around me—"

"What?" Yuuji snaps his head up, because—no. *No.* "No way! I like being around you!"

"Well, you're not doing a great job of showing it."

"Yeah, 'cause we're *under attack,*" Yuuji stresses. As if to mock him, a bird starts singing cheerfully somewhere nearby. "And after what happened at the detention centre, I don't think you're safe with—"

He realises too late that the bird was trying to warn him.

The Special Grade forest curse comes trudging out of the trees. Yuuji leaps to his feet immediately, but when the curse attacks, he realises: he's at a disadvantage.

The first time this happened, Yuuji and Todo had been able to hold off the Special Grade until Gojo arrived. Todo's Boogie Woogie was the sole reason for their survival. But now Todo is halfway across campus, guarding the warehouse because Yuuji told him to, and Fushiguro is here with him.

In this timeline, they die together, with the curse's flower buds taking root in their guts and growing up through their vital organs. It's a small mercy. In his last moments, Yuuji at least gets the honour of holding Fushiguro's hand.

Then he tries again. He relives the Exchange Event again and tries to tweak things so that Mahito's entire group gets wiped out early. He stays away from Fushiguro and sticks close to Todo instead—only for Fushiguro to show up anyway, white-faced and out of breath. He frantically checks Yuuji over for injuries when he sees him, and he explains in short, curt words that he'd heard a false report that Yuuji and Todo had been killed. Yuuji desperately tries to get him to go back to his post with Maki, where he was safe, only for Fushiguro to turn to ash in his hands as the volcano-head curse shows up.

He tries again. The detention centre, this time. He doesn't freeze when the Special Grade shows up. He's determined not to call out for Sukuna, so he urges Fushiguro to find Kugisaki and run. He doesn't explain anything after that—he waits until he hears Fushiguro's Divine Dog howling outside the building, and then he brings down the entire centre with the Special Grade still trapped inside.

He doesn't find out until afterwards, when he meets up with Ijichi and finds Fushiguro missing, that Fushiguro had left Divine Dog to guard Kugisaki and gone back into the building for Yuuji. Yuuji picks through the rubble for an hour, his hands trembling, before he finds Fushiguro's body.

He tries again.

And again.

...And again.

He wakes up on Ieiri's autopsy table once, his eyes adjusting quickly to the fluorescent white light. After he sits up, and everyone in the room gets over their shock, Gojo hands him a towel to cover up with while Ijichi fetches him a new uniform.

"By the way, Yuuji-kun," Gojo says, with an air of forced casualness. "Quite the collection of scars there. You a delinquent or something?"

Yuuji looks down at his body and grimaces. There's barely a patch of skin that *hasn't* been marked with Fushiguro's deaths—there's the collection of marks from Shinjuku, a Lichtenberg figure on his shoulders from Jacob's Ladder, about a dozen different stab wounds in his chest. A jagged, spiky mark on his lower abdomen from that forest curse's flower buds. There's more hidden under his hair, too, from the times when Fushiguro died from a head wound.

"I've just lost a lot of fights," Yuuji says. From the way Gojo tilts his head, Yuuji thinks he knows that it's not the whole truth. But he lets it slide, and he hands over Yuuji's uniform without question. Yuuji silently pulls his clothes on and watches the proof of his failures disappear.

He tries again. It doesn't work.

It feels like Yuuji's lived a thousand lives, and Fushiguro's died in almost every single one.

Every time, it's because he's followed Yuuji somewhere he shouldn't have gone. Every time, it's because Yuuji tries to hold him at arm's length, which just makes Fushiguro stick to him even harder. It takes way too many deaths for Yuuji to realise:

Fushiguro feels *responsible.*

It's enough to make him want to break down laughing. Fushiguro chases after Yuuji because he feels like he has to save him. In Fushiguro's eyes, he's the one who brought Yuuji into the jujutsu world, so he's responsible for saving Yuuji. Which, in Yuuji's opinion, is just—*so* stupid.

It's not meant to be like this. Yuuji is meant to die so that Fushiguro can live—that's how things are between them. That's how things have *always* been between them. From the very start, Yuuji's been trading his life for Fushiguro's. Things aren't meant to go the other way round.

Somewhere along the way, Yuuji got used to Shinjuku. He got used to Fushiguro just being there, passive, waiting for a hand to pull him up. He forgot this one crucial thing:

He forgot that Fushiguro's always hated being saved.

No matter how much Yuuji tries to shelter him, to shove him in a little safehouse until the danger is gone, Fushiguro will find a way to break out. He'll find a way to follow Yuuji, to make sure he's safe, because he's good like that. He doesn't think he's good, but he is, he *is,* and it's killing Yuuji—both literally and figuratively.

If Yuuji is in danger, then Fushiguro will try to save him. And if Yuuji is alive, then he's always in danger. That's just what happens when you're Sukuna's vessel.

If Sukuna is incarnated in Yuuji, then Fushiguro dies. Somehow, some way—he dies. Once Fushiguro knows Yuuji, starts *caring* for Yuuji, then it's over. The moment Fushiguro meets Yuuji is the moment he seals his fate.

The way forward is simple: Yuuji will make it so that they never meet.

He first met Fushiguro on a summer night in the middle of June. Yuuji will go back and undo it. He'll jump to before then and get rid of Sukuna's finger somehow, or hand it off to Fushiguro before that curse can show up and attack the rest of the Occult Club. Yes, that's it. That's how he'll save him.

He wishes he could do things differently. He wishes there could be a world where he gets to live with Fushiguro in peace. But, clearly, that world doesn't exist, and Yuuji is willing to give up anything if it means Fushiguro is safe.

Now, in this timeline, Yuuji leans down, over Fushiguro's prone body. They're in the ruins of the detention centre—it's the first official mission they ever went on, and now Yuuji will make sure that it's the last. Fushiguro's right arm is missing. The Special Grade blasted it off.

"Hey," Yuuji whispers, his voice cracking. Fushiguro stares back at him, unseeing. Dead. Yuuji reaches out and wipes away a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. If this is the last time he ever sees him, then he wants to remember him as he was when he was alive. "It was really nice knowing you, Fushiguro. I'm glad we got to meet."

The familiar burning pain creeps into his chest, sinking into the junction of his right shoulder. Yuuji closes his eyes and succumbs to it willingly. If he has one regret this time, it's that he and Fushiguro have left Kugisaki alone.

June, 2018—that's where it all started.

So June, 2018—that's where Yuuji will make it end.

Yuuji opens his eyes and immediately shuts them again.

"Ugh—"

It's blindingly bright. Yuuji brings a hand up to shield his eyes and squints against the sun. There's an onslaught of noise, the chatter of a crowd.

Yuuji lowers his hand and immediately spots a curse.

It's a vaguely fishy-looking thing, except it's got legs that it uses to cling to the poles at the end of the rugby field. Yuuji stares at it and fights the urge to run over and punch it to smithereens.

He recognises where he is: his high school. His *first* high school, the normal one in Sendai. He's standing on the field, and he's holding something in his hands. He looks down and finds a shotput ball there, round and well-worn.

So he's really just gone back to that exact day. Yuuji glances up and finds Coach Takagi basking in the applause of the students—the coach's shotput lies in the grass a few metres away. Yes, that's right: Yuuji's competing against Takagi to see which club he'll end up being in.

Huh. At least it's kind of validating to know that he and his senpais were right about the rugby field being cursed. Yuuji shrugs and hefts the shotput in his hand.

He knows that Fushiguro is here somewhere. He'd told Yuuji that he saw his display of strength. So Yuuji is careful to not let even the tiniest dregs of cursed energy spill out—it wouldn't do to draw Fushiguro's attention.

He throws the shotput, and it wedges itself in the goalpost just like the first time. Yuuji turns around and flashes his fellow Occult Club members a thumbs-up. He tries not to let his gaze wander, but it can't be helped—he flicks his eyes sideways, searching, searching—

A familiar head of spiky hair sticks out over the rest of the crowd. A rush of fondness swells up in Yuuji, so sudden that it nearly paralyses him.

There you are, he thinks longingly. It's strange to feel like this—to know that he could easily walk up to Fushiguro right now and start a conversation, but to also know that it would doom them both.

By now, Fushiguro is a crucial part of him. Without him, Yuuji's missing a limb, a rib, an eye, an ear—he's lost a vital sense. But, even so, he'd rather live with half a body than watch Fushiguro die on him again.

So Yuuji turns away.

The first time he lived this day, Yuuji turned left when he walked off the field. It had brought him to cross paths with Fushiguro. Now, Yuuji glances once more at that familiar haircut, and he determinedly turns right.

Now he just needs to figure out what to do with Sukuna's finger. But, before that...

He should go see his grandfather.

Chapter End Notes

yuuji: june, 2018...that's where i'll make it end

me, looking at the 2/6 chapter count: sure buddy. i believe in you

- if you got an email saying this fic updated a few days ago - MY BAD. I ACCIDENTALLY POSTED THE (very unfinished) CHAPTER 6 DRAFT. IF YOU SAW IT NO YOU DIDNT!!!!

- shibuya 109 is a famous shopping centre, and the summoning of mahoraga canonically takes place just in front of it, at the pedestrian crossroads on dogenzaka street. you can see the 109 sign behind megumi.

- choso's blood IS canonically poisonous to cursed spirits. No idea on whether or not it would work on mahito, but i wanted choso to have a cool moment so i say it would :).

My in-verse explanation is that the poison targets the essence of cursed spirits instead of their bodies, so mahito's usual 'reshape my soul' healing technique doesn't work.

- i like to think that, in the timeline where yuki kills yuuji, she also manages to kill kenjaku using the extra info he gives her.

- this chapter ended up SO MUCH longer than i thought it would be, and they're probably only gonna get longer from here. you might have noticed that the chapter count's gone up by one - that's because one of the future chapters is already shaping up to be an absolute BEHEMOTH and i figured it'd be better to split it in half. the story remains the same.

- chapter title from mitski's 'i want you':
"You're coming back
And it's the end of the world
We're starting over and I love you darlin'
And I am done, dear"

Chapter 3: all and then most of you, some and now none of you

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This time, when his grandfather tells him he has news about his parents, Yuuji doesn't tell him to shut up.

"My parents?" He fakes nonchalance, poking around with the flowers on the windowsill. "What about them? They died years ago."

His grandfather is silent for a long moment.

"Your mother," he begins, and Yuuji tenses. He can't help it. He's—he's not *certain,* exactly, which one of his parents was Kenjaku. He knows that one of them had to be, since he's related to Choso, but...

When Okkotsu killed him for a second, Yuuji had had—was it a memory? He's not sure. He thinks he remembers being held in someone's arms. He thinks he remembers peering out at the world through tiny, blurry, newborn eyes and seeing a person with hair darker than tar.

His grandfather hesitates, then sighs. "There was something wrong with your mother," he says. "She wasn't...I don't think she was human. At least, she wasn't human when she had you."

Yuuji huffs out a laugh. "That doesn't make sense, Jii-chan," he says, turning around. His grandfather is looking right at him, his brow creased in worry. "What, you're saying she was like a ghost or something? A yokai?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," his grandfather says grimly. "Yuuji, there are things in this world that you and I don't understand. Yokai, demons, ghosts—I don't know what they are, but your mother, Kaori—she could see them." He rubs a hand over his face. "She died in a car crash a year before you were born."

Now that—*that's* new information. Not just the car crash, but the fact that his mother was a sorcerer. For a moment, Yuuji feels a pang in his chest at what might've been. If his mother—the *real* Itadori Kaori—had survived and had him, then maybe he would've become a sorcerer after all. Maybe he would've had his own innate technique. Maybe he would've gone to Jujutsu Tech and met Fushiguro and Kugisaki without ever having to deal with becoming Sukuna's vessel.

But it's useless to dwell on what-ifs, so Yuuji takes a deep breath. "Jii-chan," he says. "How could she have died before she had me?"

"Something took her body," his grandfather says, and pauses to cough. Yuuji's hand twitches. Any moment now, his grandfather will pass. "The doctors were certain she was dead, but then—she was alive again. She had stitches on her head, but none of the surgeons I asked

remembered performing surgery on her. And your father, Jin—" His face twists with anger. "That *stupid* boy. He didn't care. He was just glad that he could have another chance with her."

Ah. Yuuji stares at the clock on the wall and taps his finger absently on the flower vase. So that's why his grandfather's always avoided talking about his parents. It makes sense now: Kenjaku must have taken over his mother's body, for some insane reason, and his father...

Yuuji doesn't know what happened to his father, only that he died when Yuuji was barely past infancy. From the dark look on his grandpa's face right now, he doesn't think he'll ever know.

"Anyway, that's not the point," his grandfather grunts, rolling over to face the wall. "The two of them died years ago. But I have my suspicions. When we moved away from Sendai, I never told Kaori's family where we went, not even when we came back. So, Yuuji—look out for yourself. If your 'mother' ever comes looking for you, you turn her down and run. And...you're a strong kid, so help others."

Oh. They've reached that part of the conversation. By the time his grandpa finishes speaking, he'll be dead.

Yuuji moves to sit by the bed. This grief is different to all the others: it's softer, a shapeless pulsing ache in his chest compared to the clawing animal that Yuuji feels whenever he thinks about Fushiguro or Kugisaki. This is the normal kind of grief. Everyone's grandpa dies eventually. There's no one to be mad at here except time.

"Jii-chan," he says softly.

"Let me finish, brat."

"Okay, Jii-chan."

His grandfather coughs. "Like I said," he says gruffly. "You're a strong kid, so help others. Save the people you can, even if it's only those closest to you. Don't expect them to thank you. Just save as many people as you can, even if you can only save one."

Something warm hits the back of Yuuji's hand. He looks down and realises, suddenly, that he's started to cry.

"When you die," his grandfather says, "make sure you're surrounded by people. Don't end up like me."

The silence that follows feels like a steel band, slowly constricting around Yuuji's ribs. He forces himself to breathe, focusing on counting the seconds instead of his grandpa's still body.

"Jii-chan?" he says, even though he knows there'll be no answer.

Yuuji's grandfather dies just like he did the first time: peacefully, quietly, and with only one person at his side. Yuuji sits by his bed for a while and holds his hand, staring at his stupid, wrinkly, beloved old face.

Save as many people as you can, even if you can only save one.

"I'm trying, Jii-chan," Yuuji tells him quietly through the tears. "There's one who I'm trying to save right now."

He reaches over to call the nurse.

The rest of his grandfather's departure from the hospital goes as Yuuji remembers. He fills out the paperwork numbly, pretends to ignore the pitying looks the nurses shoot him. When he finishes off the last bit of documentation, he instinctively glances to the side.

In the first timeline, this had been the moment he met Fushiguro for real. Fushiguro had been standing there, all dark and dramatic like some anime character, demanding to speak to Yuuji about the finger. Looking back on it now, Yuuji almost wants to laugh. Fushiguro had been so *serious*. Was it his first official mission as a student? Yuuji thinks it might've been.

Now, no one else stands in the hospital lobby. Yuuji thanks the receptionist and leaves without speaking to another soul.

Earlier, he'd asked his senpais to return the finger to him. Made up some stupid excuse—"My grandpa's got these super old books that I wanna compare the seal to," he'd said, lying through his teeth. "So if I could just take it home for tonight...? Thanks, Sasaki-senpai!"—and tucked the finger into his bag, box and all. Now, as night falls, he quietly makes his way back to the school.

It's surprisingly easy to break into the school. Yuuji heads straight to the dingy old thermometer shed, where the finger had been residing up until the Occult Club took it; he slips the finger back in, closes the door, then retreats to a nearby bush and waits. He'll stand guard here until Fushiguro comes looking—and, if Yuuji knows Fushiguro at all, then he *will* come looking. He's nothing if not thorough.

It's not long before Yuuji senses a soft pulse of cursed energy in the school's main building. His ears pick up the faintest sound of a howl—no, *two* howls. His heart twists. Fushiguro's white dog is still alive in this timeline. Hopefully, it will stay alive for a long time yet.

It's a perfect summer night. With the finger still wrapped in its seal, the curse that attacked Yuuji's friends the first time around doesn't appear. Yuuji leans back against the trunk of a tree and listens to the gentle buzz of the cicadas. He keeps an eye out for any cursed energy that isn't from the school or Fushiguro, but nothing shows up.

Finally, he hears the soft crunching of boots on grass. Yuuji recognises those footsteps as easily as he recognises his grandpa's—he tucks himself a bit more thoroughly behind the tree, but he can't resist taking a peek.

Fushiguro trudges into view. He looks thoroughly disgruntled. His two Divine Dogs trot happily at his side. The white one butts up against Fushiguro's hand, and Yuuji bites back a laugh when Fushiguro looks around furtively—who is he even looking for? Non-sorcerers can't even see the dogs—before leaning down and giving the dog scritches.

"I'll just check the shed one more time," Fushiguro tells the dogs. They blink up at him. "Just in case."

He steps forward, reaching out to pull open the doors to the shed. Yuuji holds his breath and prays that Fushiguro doesn't see him.

"...You've *got* to be kidding me."

Fushiguro reaches in and pulls out the finger. He turns on his phone torch and inspects it, then, finding nothing wrong with it, he tucks it into his pocket. He looks inside the shed one last time, then draws back.

"Can't believe it was back in the damn shed," he grumbles. He taps at something on his phone —texting Gojo, probably. He turns back to his dogs and ruffles their heads one last time. He goes to walk away, the white dog following suit—

The black dog falters. It lifts its nose, sniffing the air, then abruptly whips its head around to stare directly at Yuuji.

Shit.

Yuuji stares back at the dog. Weakly, he holds up one finger to his lips and shushes it. The dog just looks at him, yellow eyes unblinking.

"What is it?" Fushiguro calls. "Smell something?"

Please, Yuuji mouths, putting his hands together in a little prayer motion. He feels stupid, but then again, he knows that Fushiguro's Divine Dogs are smart enough to understand speech.

The black dog makes a low half-woof sound, deep in its throat. Yuuji cringes. He glances at Fushiguro, who's looking back in his direction. He can't help the useless wave of affection that rises up in him—*hi,* his stupid heart sighs at the sight of Fushiguro. *Hi, hello, it's you. I've missed you.*

Any second now, Fushiguro will come over to see what his dog's smelled. Any second now, he'll see Yuuji and probably drag him off to interrogate him for hanging around Sukuna's finger. Any second now, the black dog will blow his cover, will howl or bark or *something*—

The black dog turns away.

Yuuji can only watch, slack-jawed, as it pads calmly back to Fushiguro. Fushiguro, apparently at ease, just ruffles its fur and keeps walking away and out of sight.

He doesn't notice Yuuji, not even for a second. Yuuji waits until the sound of his footsteps fade before he finally allows himself to exhale.

"Man, Fushiguro," he mutters to himself. "You've gotta teach your dogs what *stranger danger* means."

Yuuji considers taking the next day off school so that he can properly mourn his grandpa, but he realises soon after waking up that he needs to talk to other people before he goes slightly insane. Besides, this is his life now—Fushiguro took the finger. Yuuji will never become Sukuna's vessel. He'll live out his days as a non-sorcerer with the people from this high school, so he should make sure to keep his friendships.

So he goes to school. He doesn't tell anyone about his grandfather—that can come later, when he's had time for the death to feel more real. Right now, he feels like an awful grandson, because all he can really feel is relief: relief that the finger is gone and Fushiguro is safe.

Sure, he's sad about the fact that he'll never get to go to Jujutsu Tech and make friends with Fushiguro and Kugisaki—but for Fushiguro's safety, it's a small price to pay. He flips his pen lazily between his fingers as he stares out the window of his classroom, waiting for his teacher to come in and start the day. Around him, his classmates chat about mundane things. Some of them talk to him, but Yuuji only responds enough to be polite before going back to thinking.

A lot of people are late today, he notes absently. Maybe there's some kind of summer flu bug going around? But no—he gets his answer to that question when the doors open and a bunch of students come swarming in, all looking frazzled. They're talking amongst themselves, discussing something in low voices.

"Hashimoto!" calls out one of the boys who's already in the classroom. He's at the desk directly to Yuuji's right, along with a bunch of their other friends, so Yuuji looks over out of idle curiosity. "Why're you so late? You nearly missed the bell!"

"Not my fault, dude," Hashimoto says, wide-eyed. "There was this crazy accident at the train station."

"What, did someone fall on the tracks or something?"

"No, this kid got stuck between the doors—wait, I took a video. It was so weird, man. Like, look..."

There's a brief lull in conversation as everyone leans in to watch the video on Hashimoto's phone. Yuuji turns away, resuming his pen-spinning, but he can hear the faint tinny sound of the video. There's the sound of a crowd, of footsteps, the mechanical train announcements. Then, suddenly, a bang and a loud yell, followed by a series of more clanging sounds.

One of the boys swears. "What the—"

"Is someone pulling him into the train?!"

"No! There was no one in the carriage! That's why it's weird, right? He looks like he's being yanked around by a ghost or something. It's creepy."

There's a loud slam, followed by a crunch. In the video, a woman screams. Someone else calls for help, sounding terrified. Yuuji glances over and finds the group of boys crowded around Hashimoto's phone, all with looks of horror on their faces.

"Fuck," one of them says. "His *head—"*

"I thought the doors were automated so stuff like that wouldn't happen?"

"That's what I said!" Hashimoto waves his phone around frantically. Yuuji catches a glimpse of the screen, zoomed in on the face of some poor boy trapped between a set of train doors—

Wait.

Yuuji stares. His blood freezes in his veins.

No. No, no, *no*—

He looks like he's being yanked around by a ghost. Or, to non-sorcerers...a curse.

A curse that would've been drawn to him because of Sukuna's finger. The same finger that Yuuji had as good as handed over to him yesterday night. Because—because that's *Fushiguro* on the screen, his head crushed like a watermelon between the sliding doors, his arm clearly dislocated from being pulled around. That's Fushiguro. That's—

"Shit," one of the boys says, running a hand through his hair. "Is the guy okay? Did someone call an ambulance?"

Hashimoto grimaces and shakes his head. "Nah," he says, and Yuuji feels his world splinter and fall apart. "I saw them putting him in a body bag right as I caught my train."

The pen slips from Yuuji's fingers and clatters to the floor.

Yuuji ends up taking the day off school after all. He tells the teacher about his grandfather and gets let off immediately, sent away with hasty condolences.

He makes it halfway down the road before he falls to his knees.

The slicing sensation is familiar by now. Yuuji claws at his body anyway, trying to alleviate the feeling of being diced up into tiny pieces. He hears shouting and footsteps—someone grabs his shoulder.

"Hey! Hey, kid, are you—should I call an ambulance? *Kid!"*

Yuuji lets out a low groan in response. The burning pain has started. He feels it on both sides of his head, compressing his skull.

A set of train doors. That's what it's meant to feel like. Because Fushiguro had been caught between those doors, like a mouse in a trap, and his head had been—

This time, Yuuji leaves the world in a particularly undignified way: he vomits on the sidewalk, collapses next to it, and promptly passes out.

"...Itadori-san. *Itadori-san."*

Yuuji blinks himself awake. He's sitting down, his arms propped up against something. He reaches up to scrub the sleep from his eyes.

"Itadori-san," someone says softly from above him, and he looks up. It's a nurse, one from the hospital whose face he vaguely recognises. She smiles down at him regretfully. "I'm sorry, but the hospital's closing."

Yuuji lifts his head. His breath hitches when he sees where he is: his grandfather's bedside, sleeping with his head on the mattress like he always used to do in middle school. His grandfather's sleeping too. Yuuji can hear his breaths from here, deep and even, accompanied by a rattling whistle of a snore.

Yuuji's gone back again.

He lets out a whoosh of breath and drops his head back onto his hands. Something in him shivers and cracks—he's back again. He's failed again. He lost Fushiguro again.

"Itadori-san—"

"I'll be up in a second," he says. To his embarrassment, his voice quakes a little. "Could I just, uh—have a minute?"

The nurse pauses. But all the nurses here have soft spots for him, since he's been coming here for ages. Plus, he brings them flowers and little trinkets he picks up on the walk to the hospital.

"A few minutes," the nurse eventually agrees. "But please be out by ten past five, Itadori-san. We need to do the rounds."

"Yeah, that's—that's fine. Thank you."

"It's alright. I'll give you some space."

There's the sound of footsteps, and then the door gently sliding shut. Yuuji squeezes his eyes closed and presses his forehead against the backs of his hands. Something like devastation rises up the back of his throat.

He'd been so sure that it would work.

He'd been so *sure.* After all, there was no reason for Fushiguro to put himself in danger. There was no one that Fushiguro would be putting himself on the line to save. There was no Yuuji. It was supposed to *work.*

And yet.

Even if Fushiguro isn't putting himself in danger, it seems that the danger is still coming to him. Sukuna's fingers attract curses—*powerful* curses. In the original timeline, the only reason Yuuji and Fushiguro had both survived that first night was because Yuuji ate the finger.

Okay. Okay. It didn't work. So what? That just means Yuuji has to try again. He curls his fingers into fists, feels the hospital sheets drag beneath his nails. He sits up straight and pushes his hair back out of his face.

It didn't work. Yuuji will just have to try until he finds something that does.

He won't give up. He *will not* give up. He doesn't care how many times he has to relive it all. He doesn't care how much he has to uproot his life, how drastically he has to change everything. He'll save Fushiguro. He *will.*

He'll save someone, even if it's only one.

In the bed, his grandfather stirs. Yuuji checks the date on his phone—he's jumped back to the day before he and Fushiguro were supposed to meet.

Okay, Yuuji, he thinks, steeling himself. *Let's try again.*

At first, he sticks with the original plan, which is to let Fushiguro take the finger without ever knowing about Yuuji's involvement—but that backfires just like the first time Yuuji tried it. He'll let Fushiguro take the finger, and then he'll hear about it the morning after, from his classmates or the news or from seeing the wreckage on his way to school.

A freak car accident. A gas leak. A sinkhole, a train malfunction, an unexplained building collapse—non-sorcerers come up with a lot of things to explain the things that they can't see, but there's always one thing in common. There is always, *always,* an unidentified teenage boy as the sole casualty. Even though he insists he's not a hero, Fushiguro always protects the innocents around him as he dies. It makes Yuuji's throat go tight with pride and grief.

He tries again.

His next plan involves interference. He takes the finger to a secluded area and peels the seal off himself, hoping to attract the curses and take them out alone before they can threaten

Fushiguro—only for Fushiguro to show up, drawn by the sudden explosion of cursed energy, and immediately remove Yuuji from the fight. Yuuji's forgotten that, to Fushiguro, he's just a non-sorcerer getting tangled up in things he doesn't understand. When Gama appears, wrapping its tongue around Yuuji's waist and hauling him off the battlefield so quickly that he gets a crick in his neck, Yuuji gets caught completely off-guard.

"He's a civilian!" Fushiguro yells after Gama. The toad shikigami croaks back in acknowledgment. "Get him out of here!"

"Wait, no, I can—"

Gama leaps away before Yuuji can explain that he can fight the curse, too. The last thing he sees is Fushiguro, beautiful and brave, darting into the fray with his dogs by his side. Then Gama closes its mouth, sealing Yuuji inside, and Yuuji can't do anything else.

Gama carries Fushiguro's orders out until the very end. It keeps Yuuji shut in its mouth, trapped but safe, far away from the fight. A civilian. A noncombatant. Yuuji could punch clean through it if he wanted to, but—he can't. He won't. It's Fushiguro's shikigami. In the end, all he can do is yell and cry and beat weakly at the insides of Gama's throat.

When Gama dissolves into shadows, Yuuji knows that it's not because Fushiguro released the technique. When the curse—a newly-born Special Grade, now; it must have eaten the finger—finds him, he's already keeling over from the echoed pain of Fushiguro's death. It's sharp this time, a hot jab right through his stomach—did the curse stab Fushiguro? Did it shoot him clean through with raw cursed energy? Yuuji will never know.

He tries again.

This time, he meets Fushiguro at the thermometer shed. He introduces himself as a sorcerer, sort of—"My mother was one," he tells a highly-suspicious-looking Fushiguro. "Anyway, you're looking for this, right?"

He tosses Fushiguro the box with Sukuna's finger inside. Fushiguro catches it one-handed and hastily checks the inside, relaxing minutely when he sees that everything's in order.

Yuuji taps his fingers nervously on his thigh. This is the most important part. This is the part where he hopefully changes it all for the better. "I was wondering—do you have a supervisor or something? Someone you could call to escort you? Just because, um—if you take it with you, I think you'll die."

Fushiguro goes still. At his side, his black dog lets out a low growl. Yuuji holds up his hands.

"I don't mean that as a threat or anything!" he says quickly. "But my cursed technique lets me see the future, sometimes. If you take that thing, I think—I *know* you'll get attacked by a curse and die. So it'd make me feel a lot better if you had someone to, y'know, guard you or something."

Gojo-sensei, he thinks silently. It's practically a prayer. *Please, call Gojo-sensei.*

Fushiguro narrows his eyes. "You see the future?"

"Only sometimes."

"I see." Fushiguro reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone. He taps at something on the screen, and Yuuji breathes a sigh of relief, only for Fushiguro to glance up at him sharply. "Why are you helping me?"

Huh? Yuuji stares at him. What kind of question is that?

"...Why *wouldn't* I?" he asks slowly. Fushiguro's watching him intently, something intense in his gaze. Yuuji has to look away. "I mean, that thing was going to make people die if it stayed here, right? And obviously I don't want *you* dying, so...I thought I'd let you know."

Fushiguro makes a little 'huh' sound. "So you're like that," he mutters, almost to himself. Then, louder: "What's your name?"

Yuuji hesitates. But...he'll never see Fushiguro again after this night, so it should be fine, right?

"Itadori," he says. Fushiguro nods.

"I'm Fushiguro," he returns. He looks back down at his phone. "I told my sensei to come, so...he'll show up eventually. You should probably go home, Itadori. It's late."

"Oh. Yeah." Yuuji can't help but feel like it's all just a bit underwhelming. Like—this is just how it ends, then. This is the last time he ever sees Fushiguro. He clears his throat, making to move away. He's heading home to an empty house tonight. Tomorrow, he'll have to worry about cremation plans. And the day after that—

"Wait."

Yuuji stops. He looks over his shoulder. Fushiguro's not looking at him—he's inspecting the finger instead, rolling it around in his palm.

"There's a school, you know," he says slowly, and Yuuji goes still. "For sorcerers. If you wanted, you could...come back with me. We'd train you up to be a proper sorcerer."

Oh.

For a second, Yuuji imagines it. He imagines taking the offer, heading back to Jujutsu Tech. It would be a perfect world for him, to go and meet everyone else again without the weight of being Sukuna's vessel. But it's far too risky. One wrong step, and he's right back where he started. It's safest for everyone if he stays far away from the school, and from Fushiguro.

"Thanks, but it's okay," he says, fighting to keep his voice level. Fushiguro looks up at him. "I'm happy how I am."

Fushiguro holds his gaze for a moment, then nods. "Alright," he says. "If you don't want to, I won't force you." He turns the finger over in his hands, studying the peeling seal with a

disgusted expression. Yuuji watches him, and he doesn't know what possesses him to ask, but —

"Do *you* think I should do it?" he blurts out. Fushiguro looks up, surprised. Suddenly, to Yuuji, it feels like his answer is the most important thing in the world. When he only knows Yuuji as *Yuuji* and not Sukuna's vessel, does he still think Yuuji's worthy of fighting by his side?

"No," Fushiguro says bluntly. Yuuji recoils a bit.

"Oh," he squeaks out, trying to swallow the feeling of rejection. It's dumb and stupid and *dumb.* It doesn't mean anything.

...But still.

Fushiguro waves a hand. "It's nothing personal," he says, and for a second, an expression Yuuji doesn't recognise passes over his face. "It's just...if you have the chance to live a normal life, you should take it. Only crazy people choose to be sorcerers."

"You're a sorcerer," Yuuji points out automatically.

Fushiguro's face darkens. It's just the tiniest bit, but Yuuji knows him well enough by now to see it. He's hit a sore spot—which is weird, because in all the time Yuuji's known him, he's never seen Fushiguro get touchy over this topic.

"I didn't get a choice," Fushiguro replies curtly. "But that's not important. You're sure you don't want to come?"

Yuuji wants to. God, he *wants to.* But it's way too dangerous. So he shakes his head, stepping back.

"I'm good," he says. "You, uh, stay safe."

Fushiguro makes a non-committal sound. "You too," he says, checking his phone and scowling—Gojo must be running late. "Thanks for the help."

It's a clear dismissal, so Yuuji turns around to go. Slowly, he trudges past the school gate and out to the street. When he reaches the pedestrian crossing, he hears Fushiguro's phone ring behind him, loud in the quiet summer night.

Fushiguro lets out a tiny groan of annoyance, but he answers it anyway. From this distance, Yuuji can only just make out his voice.

"You're stopping for *kikufuku?"* he says, sounding indignant. "You've got to be kidding me."

A pause, as someone else—definitely Gojo—speaks on the other end. Fushiguro sighs.

"Yeah, I've got it," he says. "No issues, but I met a—"

Yuuji feels a ripple of cursed energy in the air right before he hears it: an awful chomping sound, the sound of flesh tearing, and Fushiguro's agonised yell.

He whips around immediately. *"FUSHIGURO!"*

Fushiguro's collapsed on his knees, cradling his left hand to his chest. An apelike curse perches on the gate near him. It has—

Oh, god. It has Fushiguro's hand in its mouth, torn off at the wrist. Yuuji can only watch, horrified, as it swallows the hand whole.

His feet finally start moving—he sprints towards Fushiguro, taking in the dark patch of red that's slowly spreading from where he presses his wrist to his shirt. "Fushiguro!" he yells again, and Fushiguro looks up. His eyes widen with something like fear. "Are you—"

"GO!" Fushiguro roars, and Yuuji stumbles. *"Run, Itadori! It ate the finger!"*

What?

Yuuji snaps his head around to look. And oh, *fuck*—Fushiguro's right. The curse must have eaten the hand that Fushiguro held the finger in, because it's swelling up like a balloon, its mouth splitting wide open in a smile. It's beginning to morph into a familiar form: a pale humanoid, like that one from the detention centre. Yuuji swears, jumping back. It's a Special Grade now, but—but if they hold out for long enough, if Gojo gets here in time—

"Nue!" Fushiguro bellows. Yuuji prepares for that familiar birdlike screech, the flash of electricity, but..

It never comes.

Nue doesn't manifest. When Yuuji looks around, he realises that Fushiguro's black dog is gone too. He turns to look at Fushiguro and finds him staring at his hands.

His *hands.* His hands, which he needs to summon his shikigami. His hands, which are the cornerstone of his life as a sorcerer. His hands, which are now just one half of a whole; the left is nothing but a bleeding stump.

As the curse lunges towards them, Fushiguro meets Yuuji's eyes.

"Itadori," he says, his voice cracking. "I'm sor—"

The curse rips Yuuji's head off before he can hear the rest.

He has to try again.

"Yuuji," his grandfather says. The setting sun dyes everything gold. "You're a strong kid, so —"

Yuuji closes his eyes and tunes him out.

Again. One more time. This time for sure.

He keeps thinking about it, what Fushiguro said: *I didn't get a choice.*

It was such a tiny thing, a throwaway sentence, but it worms its way into Yuuji's head and stays there, like a parasite in his brain. That look on Fushiguro's face as he told Yuuji to live a normal life—was it jealousy? Yuuji couldn't tell. He doesn't think he's ever seen Fushiguro actually jealous before.

He's known for a while now that Fushiguro never wanted to be a sorcerer. Fushiguro never said it, never told him—but from the bits and pieces that Yuuji picked up about how Fushiguro ended up with Gojo, the story became relatively clear.

It's not that Fushiguro doesn't like being a sorcerer. He *does,* Yuuji is sure of it. He's seen the thrill in Fushiguro's eyes during a particularly good training session, heard the pride in his voice when he told Yuuji and Kugisaki that he'd opened his Domain. Fushiguro likes being a sorcerer, but—

But he's never *wanted* it.

And now, as Yuuji watches him die a dozen times over on this stupid mission to retrieve Sukuna's finger, he's starting to see why.

It's becoming clearer and clearer that, if Fushiguro comes to Sendai, then he won't make it out alive. And the worst part is that it wouldn't even be unusual. Fushiguro's a sorcerer, and it would be perfectly normal for a student to die on a mission like this. Come to think of it, everyone accepted it pretty quickly when Yuuji died at the detention centre.

Willing or not, Fushiguro is a sorcerer, and sorcerers get missions. It just so happens that, no matter what Yuuji does, this mission is a death sentence.

So Yuuji takes matters into his own hands. He goes back further. Not to the day that he and Fushiguro met—no, he goes back to the week before. He finds the finger in the thermometer shed, and then he takes the train to Tokyo.

It's a long journey to Jujutsu Tech. By the time he gets to the gate, it's already late afternoon. He can sense the barrier, a shifting mass of cursed energy; it will alert Yaga the second Yuuji touches it.

Yuuji reaches out and presses his palm flat against it. He waits. One second. Two seconds. Three—

A hand lands on his shoulder. Yuuji nearly chokes on the sudden oppressive sense of sheer power.

"You're a bit far from the city, kid," Gojo says casually, tilting his head down to look at Yuuji through the blindfold. "Mind explaining why you're here?"

For a second, Yuuji can barely think. Gojo's just—it's so all-encompassing, his power. It makes the animal part of Yuuji's hindbrain go straight into survival mode. He fumbles for his bag.

"I have something to give you," he blurts out. God, he can *taste* Gojo's power, an unpleasant ozone-like tinge in the air. "I'm from Sendai. I can see the future. And I found this in my school."

He holds out the box. Gojo raises his brows and reaches out to take it, then goes still when he opens it and sees the finger inside.

"Huh," he says, looking at Yuuji. "You said you can see the future? Is that your cursed technique?"

"Yeah. That's how I knew where this place was."

"You're a sorcerer?"

"Uh, not really."

"Not *really?"*

"I don't really do the whole fighting curses thing. My mother was a sorcerer."

"Huh," Gojo says again. He reaches up and hooks one finger over the edge of his blindfold, dragging it down to reveal one sky-blue eye. He stares at Yuuji for a second, so intense that Yuuji squirms. "Do you *want* to be a sorcerer?"

Yuuji stares at him. "What?"

Gojo shrugs. "You're about the right age to be a student here," he says. "You wanna join? We've got the space."

For a second, Yuuji just thinks: *is he stupid?* Yuuji's a total stranger—just some kid who showed up on the steps outside the school with Sukuna's finger, claiming that he knows the future, and Gojo's *offering him a spot?* He's insane. Or incredibly naïve. There's no other explanation.

But then that ever-present power around them gets a tiny bit heavier, and Yuuji realises: no. No, this isn't Gojo being naïve at all. This is his way of trying to keep tabs on an unknown quantity. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, or however the saying goes.

But Yuuji never planned on accepting the offer anyway. Just like when Fushiguro asked, he shakes his head.

"I'm not interested in becoming a sorcerer," he says, then hesitates. "But, just so you know—I think something will happen on Halloween this year. In Shibuya. There's going to be a major attack. A group of curse users are planning to seal you."

Gojo hums. "Really? How useful that you've told me, then," he says cheerfully. He's still staring at Yuuji with one eye, and there's a cool undertone to his voice that makes the hair prickle on the back of Yuuji's neck. "By the way, what's your name?"

"Itadori Yuuji."

"Well, Yuuji-kun!" Gojo lifts his hand from Yuuji's shoulder and gives him a thumbs-up. "Thanks for the advice. And for dropping off this finger—you've saved one of my students a trip. You sure you don't want to join?"

"No, thank you."

"Not at all?"

"Not at all."

"Hm," Gojo says. Yuuji gets the feeling he knows he's lying. "Alright, then. You're from Sendai, you said?"

Yuuji nods.

"You came a long way," Gojo muses. He holds up the finger and wiggles it. "All because you wanted to hand this in?"

Yuuji nods again. Gojo tilts his head.

"I see," he says, his voice perfectly even. Yuuji can't tell what he's thinking. "Well, Yuuji-kun. Travel safe."

He pats Yuuji on the shoulder and abruptly warps out of view. Yuuji's left standing there, alone on the mountain, but still with the creeping feeling that he's being watched.

He returns to Sendai.

Life is—normal. Suspiciously normal. The day that he was supposed to meet Fushiguro comes and goes; his grandfather passes away. Yuuji goes through the motions with held breath, always expecting the other shoe to drop, but...

But it doesn't. He never doubles over from the pain of Fushiguro's death. A week passes from the night of their supposed first meeting, and then another. Slowly, Yuuji starts to relax.

It's lonelier than he thought it would be. Yuuji's lived in an empty house for years, ever since his grandpa got sick, but—it's different now. Now, unless he's in the mood for a trip to the

cemetry, there's nowhere else for him to visit and no one for him to see. It's just Yuuji and the house.

There's an odd disconnect between him and his classmates. Now that Yuuji can see curses, he can't *stop* seeing them—the school's infested with them. Tiny ones, fly-heads, the sort that don't need to be paid any attention, but they still catch Yuuji's eye. They're like a constant reminder that he's changed. Before, in the first timeline, everything had been split so neatly: there was his old life in Sendai, and his new life in Tokyo. The two of them almost never touched. But now Yuuji is here, with no new life to speak of, but he's grappling with it all the same.

His friends notice him changing. They give him space; they assume it's because of his grandfather dying. Iguchi's mother starts sending him to school with extra food to share with Yuuji, which is sweet even though Yuuji's been cooking for himself for ages. He tries to live the way he would've before he ever met and lost Fushiguro, but...

But, to be completely honest, Yuuji's not sure if he remembers who he was before the grief.

It's not just Fushiguro. It's Kugisaki too, and Gojo, and everyone else at the school. Yuuji *misses* them. He constantly finds himself turning around to talk to people who aren't there. He just has to walk around with this—this *feeling* in his chest, all heavy and sad and stopping him from taking a full breath, and he can't even tell anyone about it because the only people who would understand are the people he can never speak to again.

It feels weird to mourn people who are still alive. To mourn people who don't know you. Sometimes, Yuuji finds himself looking up maps of Tokyo on the school computers, using the online streetview to revisit the places he went to with Fushiguro and Kugisaki—just to remind himself that it was real. Sometimes, he stands in the empty bathroom of his empty house and strips off his shirt to examine all the marks that Fushiguro's deaths left on him.

This is all Yuuji has left of him now. Yuuji can't decide if he wants to keep the marks forever or tear them off his skin.

So it's a lonely life, and it's a strange life, but it's a life where Yuuji's loved ones are alive. It's a life where *Fushiguro* is alive. For that, Yuuji will take anything, so he forces himself to learn how to live normally again.

It gets easier as the weeks pass. He stays behind at school to play bogus ghost games with Iguchi and Sasaki, dodges Coach Takagi's attempts to recruit him for track and field, starts looking for a job so that he won't have to keep relying on his grandpa's savings. He crushes fly-heads beneath his heels as he walks through the school halls. He doesn't have a mobile phone, so he gets out his grandpa's radio and tunes it in to the Tokyo news network. It soothes him, somehow, to hear the mundane events going on where his friends are. He'll hear about a traffic jam and wonder if they got stuck in it. A sudden rain shower will have him thinking about how Kugisaki definitely got caught without an umbrella. An announcement of a train line being closed for maintenance makes him laugh when he imagines Fushiguro's pissed-off reaction.

Slowly, almost without Yuuji noticing, June whittles itself away. He's settling—it hurts a bit, but he's settling.

He's three days into July when Fushiguro dies.

It's a Tuesday. He's just gotten back from school. He's still in his uniform, surveying his fridge and considering his options for dinner, when he feels a sharp slice of pain right across his torso.

Yuuji's breath hitches. He grabs at his chest. Another line of pain slashes down his back, clean and precise. He crumples to his knees and stays there, pressed against the kitchen floor.

The pain is agonising. It's familiar. And *it shouldn't be happening.* If Yuuji is feeling like this, then it means Fushiguro is dead. But in the original timeline, he was alive in July. What happened? What possibly could've happened?

The radio is on the kitchen counter, turned down to the lowest volume. It was talking about rain earlier, all grey clouds and drizzle. Now, Yuuji fumbles over it until he can turn the volume up enough to listen.

"...citizens are told to evacuate from a five-hundred-metre radius around Eishuu Detention Centre in West Tokyo City..."

Oh.

He forgot. Somehow, he forgot. He'd assumed that the Special Grade in the detention centre had appeared because of resonance from Sukuna's incarnation, like the Yasohachi Bridge curse, but maybe...well, maybe they just got unlucky.

The Special Grade's appeared, and Fushiguro and Kugisaki must have been sent to handle it. And without Sukuna there to run interference...

They never would've survived. Even if they ran the second the Special Grade showed up, they wouldn't have made it.

The burning feeling starts, right in the middle of Yuuji's chest. How did Fushiguro die this time? Did he go out first, or was it Kugisaki? Did they get separated, or did they watch each other die?

Was there anything Yuuji could've done?

No matter what he does, Fushiguro is still a sorcerer. He'll still be sent out on these missions, over and over again. The only way for Yuuji to protect him from these missions is to be there with him—but Yuuji *can't.* He can't. He can't be with Fushiguro because it will kill him. He can't be away from Fushiguro because it will kill him. No matter what Yuuji tries, Fushiguro will die fighting a curse.

So: Fushiguro dies on a Tuesday in July. Yuuji follows him soon after, curled up in the kitchen of his childhood home. Meanwhile, on the counter, the radio babbles on about a detention centre collapsing in a city three hundred kilometres away.

Yuuji tries again.

He hands the finger in to Gojo again. He tells him about the detention centre, emphasises that they *need* to send at least a Grade One sorcerer, even if it's an urgent case. Gojo listens to him—of course he does. Like Yuuji, he would do anything to keep Fushiguro safe.

At first, Yuuji thinks he's done it. After all, in the months following the detention centre, Fushiguro had survived just fine without Yuuji. But—

But for those two months, Yuuji and Fushiguro were separated. Yuuji has no idea what Fushiguro did in that time. In the original timeline, there must have been a mission that Fushiguro missed because he was recovering from the detention centre—because in this timeline, Fushiguro goes on it, and he dies.

Over and over again, he dies.

The worst part is that Yuuji doesn't even know *how.* He doesn't see Fushiguro as he dies. He doesn't know where he died or what killed him. He doesn't know if he was alone, if Kugisaki died too, if one of the other students had to carry his corpse back to the school. All he knows is that it must have been another mission, another curse.

Most jujutsu sorcerers die young. Yuuji's never quite considered it—never really thought about the fact that every single one of their missions could be their last—until now.

Eventually, he reaches a point where he writes down everything he fears could kill Fushiguro. The detention centre. Any missions around that time frame that are stronger than Grade Two. Anything where Gojo is less than a hundred-percent confident in Fushiguro's ability to defeat it. When he goes to Jujutsu Tech to give up the finger, he hands Gojo the list as well. Gojo unfolds it, scanning it quickly, then looks up at Yuuji.

"You know Megumi?" he asks, his voice forcefully light. The list is, of course, obviously focused on Fushiguro. Yuuji shakes his head.

"I just saw him a lot, in the future," he says. Gojo makes a humming sound and folds the list up carefully. He watches Yuuji with a single eye, clearly suspicious, but he still lets him go.

This time around, Fushiguro survives June. He survives July. When they get to August, Yuuji starts to breathe again. Gojo must be acting like the world's most overbearing mother hen, now that Yuuji's gone and drawn his attention to the fact that Fushiguro could die at any moment.

Fushiguro must be so sick of him by now. The thought makes Yuuji smile.

The day of the Exchange Event—and Yuuji's 'resurrection'—rolls around. Yuuji told Gojo about it in as much detail as he could remember, and he spends the whole day anxiously anticipating the echo of Fushiguro's death, but...

Nothing happens. Yuuji makes it through the school day, and then he heads to the train station and picks up a bouquet on the way, and then he gets on the train to the cemetery. There's no slicing pain, no telltale burning sensation. The sun is starting to go down and Fushiguro is still alive. It's the longest period of time he's managed to survive since Yuuji first stopped them from meeting.

Yuuji clutches his bouquet tighter and feels his heart shake in his chest. Relief. All he can feel is relief—Fushiguro is still alive. *Fushiguro is still alive.*

Hopefully, Gojo managed to stop Mahito's group from stealing the Cursed Womb Death Paintings. It breaks Yuuji's heart a little to think that Choso might not be incarnated, but if Choso's brothers show up at the Yasohachi Bridge without Yuuji there, then Kugisaki's dead for sure. Fushiguro might be able to make it out if Kugisaki draws the Death Paintings away from him, but Yuuji's watched him die too many times to be able to confidently say he'll survive.

He makes it to the cemetery. It's mostly empty, except for a single man in a coat and hat on the other side of it. Yuuji pays him no mind and picks his way over to the Itadori family grave. There are only three people's ashes held here, and Yuuji carefully cleans the names of each one:

Itadori Jin

Itadori Kaori

Itadori Wasuke

His hands linger on his mother's name. He's been thinking about her more lately, ever since his grandpa mentioned her on his deathbed. He wonders if his father ever suspected anything. If his father ever *knew.*

Again: these are useless thoughts. Yuuji shakes them out of his head and carefully swaps out the last bouquet he left here with the new one. He can practically hear his grandpa yelling at him for wasting money on dead people, but...well, the flowers are just as much for Yuuji as they are for his grandpa. It makes him feel better to see his parents and grandfather at rest with something beautiful to keep them company.

Footsteps crunch behind him. Yuuji looks up to find the man from the other side of the cemetery standing there, just a few metres away. The sun's glare is in Yuuji's eyes, so he has to squint to make out the man's face.

It takes Yuuji a second to recognize him. After all, they only really met once, and he'd been wearing a monk's outfit then. But then he takes off his hat, and Yuuji sees the stitches.

His blood runs cold. Which is funny, because that's the part of him that he got directly from the man in front of him.

If your 'mother' ever comes looking for you, you turn her down and run.

But Yuuji can't. He *can't.* They've already made eye contact. He can't run without revealing he knows more than he should. All he can do is stand there and watch as Kenjaku raises a hand in greeting.

"Itadori Yuuji-kun, right?" he calls, smiling pleasantly. "Could I borrow a moment of your time?"

They take a walk.

There's no way Yuuji's having this conversation in front of his family grave. Not in front of his grandfather, and definitely not in front of his *mother,* whose body Kenjaku stole. So they go for a walk, strolling leisurely past other people's dead families instead, and Yuuji curls his hands into fists and wonders if he could kill Kenjaku, right here and right now.

"My name is Geto Suguru," Kenjaku tells him. *Lie.* "I was a relative of your mother's. Just think of me as your uncle." He glances back over his shoulder, at the Itadori grave. "My condolences for your grandfather."

"It's fine."

"Hm." Kenjaku reaches into his sleeve. He pulls out a brightly-coloured candy—a mint?—and pinches it between his thumb and forefinger. "You're doing alright? Does the school know you're living alone?"

"Jii-chan owned the house, so it doesn't matter. It's not like I need to pay rent or anything." Yuuji focuses on the graves that they pass, skimming his eyes over the names. Inamura. Umemoto. Akamatsu. "Sorry, Geto-san, but is there a point to this? It's just—if you're looking to take me in or something, don't bother. I'm not interested."

Kenjaku holds up a hand. "Oh, no, I understand," he says. "You're practically an adult by now, after all. You're what, sixteen?"

"Fifteen." Is he pretending not to know on purpose, or did he really forget his own son's birthday? Yuuji's never had a complex about his parents before, but now, he can't help but feel a little burst of resentment deep in his stomach.

"Fifteen. Of course." Kenjaku nods. "Actually, Yuuji, I was hoping to speak to you about your involvement in jujutsu sorcery."

It takes every bit of self-control Yuuji has to not react visibly. He keeps his eyes on his feet. Does a quick catalogue of his body, to make sure he's not doing anything weird with his hands.

"Jujutsu sorcery?" he asks, keeping his voice even. He can't give anything away. He can't let Kenjaku realise that he knows more than he should.

"Well, I assume you know what jujutsu is, since you handed in a cursed object to Jujutsu Tech two months ago," Kenjaku says casually. "And, according to my friends at Jujutsu Tech, you can see the future."

It feels like Yuuji's been plunged into a vat of ice. At his side, where Kenjaku can't see, Yuuji clenches and unclenches his fingers in an attempt to calm himself down.

Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He'd known it would draw attention. He'd *known* it would stick out like a sore thumb, he'd *known* it would be incredibly suspicious, but he'd done it anyway. Anything to save Fushiguro. But now—

What can he do? What can he say?

He'll play dumb. It's the safest option for now. So he shrugs and says, "Yeah, I did. And I can. Is that a big deal?"

Kenjaku lets out a little laugh. "Well, considering the circumstances, it caused quite a stir," he says. "One of the most dangerous cursed objects in the country, handed in by an unregistered sorcerer who no one had ever heard of before? And not only that, but a sorcerer with an accurate list of future events? Yes, Yuuji, it's quite a big deal." He tilts his head. Yuuji can feel his eyes on him, like a bird of prey. "Is that all you have to say about it?"

Play dumb. Play dumb. Play dumb.

Yuuji shrugs again. "Yeah, I guess," he says. He can feel his heart thumping in his chest, one-two-one-two. A military drum. "What else is there to say?"

Kenjaku looks at him for a moment. Just—looks at him, his eyes sharp in the dying dusk light.

Then he sighs. "I see," he says, and pulls out his phone. "One moment."

Yuuji watches as he swiftly types something up, tapping his finger at the end decisively. Was he sending a message? To who? Should Yuuji have stopped him?

Kenjaku slips his phone away. He's still got his little mint, and he rolls it around his palm now, letting it catch in the lines and divots of his hand.

"On March 18th, last year," he says, "I cursed Fushiguro Tsumiki in Saiko Doman Green Park, Saitama."

Yuuji stops dead in his tracks.

For a second, it feels like the world stops spinning. Yuuji stares straight ahead and doesn't think of anything at all.

Then—

"What?" he croaks out.

Kenjaku is watching him carefully. "On March 18th, last year," he repeats, "I cursed Fushiguro Tsumiki in Saiko Doman Green Park, Saitama. I gave her one of these." He holds up the mint in his hand, cheerfully innocent-looking. "A cursed object. The tooth of an ancient sorcerer. She ate it and became a vessel. I triggered her curse two months later and put her into a coma."

Yuuji's brain feels like it's just spontaneously combusted. Why would Kenjaku—why would he *tell* Yuuji this? Why would he—

"You can't go back and help her," Kenjaku notes curiously, like a scientist making an observation. He closes his fingers over the mint—the *tooth.* Yuuji can hear the wrapper crinkling. "That Binding Vow you made—you can't travel back in time more than once in a lifetime, can you?"

What?

What?

How does he know? How does he *know?* Yuuji's never breathed a word about it to anyone, least of all *fucking Kenjaku.* His body finally comes back online, and he swings his fist up—

The world collapses on top of him.

At least, that's what it feels like. Yuuji crashes to the ground, feeling like the sky itself is crushing him. He gasps for breath, scrabbling at the dirt, and he realises—

There's nothing on top of him. There's no weight, no cursed spirit doing Kenjaku's bidding. Yuuji's just suddenly been flattened to the ground, his own body weight increasing by what feels like a thousand times.

No—not his weight. It's *gravity*. Increased gravity. The very same thing he warned Tsukumo about, back in the Tomb of the Star.

Kenjaku's boots move into Yuuji's field of view. "Your cursed energy is all tangled, you know," he says, almost conversational. "I'm sure Gojo Satoru noticed it too, with his Six Eyes; he probably just didn't know what it was. But I have more experience with Binding Vows than anyone else on earth, so of course *I* recognised the scars of one. It's really given you a beating, hasn't it?"

Kenjaku steps away, then, and sits down on the nearest grave. On somebody's *grave.* He just parks his ass there like it's a common bench. Yuuji feels something like hatred spark to life in his stomach.

"I'm sure you're confused," Kenjaku tells him, stretching his arms above his head. "Let me walk you through it, yes?"

Yuuji tries to respond and finds that he can't. His throat is too weighed down for that. All he can make is a strangled gargling sound, like an animal caught in a trap.

Kenjaku seems to take it as an answer. He looks down at Yuuji, propping his chin up on one hand.

"You have to see it from my perspective," he says patiently. "You know who I am, obviously —so imagine my surprise when I heard that a boy named Itadori Yuuji had entered the jujutsu world, claiming to know the future." His eyes bore into Yuuji's, dark and slate-like. The stitches on his head look stark in the dying light. "I know you, Yuuji. You should never have acquired cursed energy until I gave the word. So I concluded you must have travelled from a future where you *did* have cursed energy." He waves a hand at Yuuji's twitching, gravity-stricken body. "Of course, now that I've seen you, it all makes sense. Binding Vows are tricky."

He flicks a finger, and the gravity on Yuuji's throat lifts enough for him to take a gasping breath. He coughs a few times, then manages to form words.

"Tsumiki," he croaks, and Kenjaku raises a brow. "You—why did you—"

"Well, your Vow's something to do with Fushiguro Megumi, isn't it?" Kenjaku asks, and Yuuji chokes on his own spit. "I thought that, if you could, you would change her fate on his behalf. But, as I've told you the date and location, and she still remains cursed..." He shrugs. "It tells me that you can't travel back in time any further. Nor can you travel into the future. If you could, then you would've stopped me from killing Fushiguro Megumi as well."

Yuuji's heart damn near stops beating.

Stop him from what? From *what?*

From *killing Fushiguro?*

But that's not right. Fushiguro's alive. Kenjaku's right here. Kenjaku's right here, and he couldn't have killed him, because Yuuji would've felt it. Besides, Kenjaku can't be in two places at once. And—

Right on cue, the first line of pain slices across the small of Yuuji's back.

He makes an awful half-yelp half-scream sound. Kenjaku sucks in a breath through his teeth.

"Ah," he says. "Mahito got my text, then. Does this happen to you every time Fushiguro Megumi dies?"

Mahito? *Mahito?* For a second, all Yuuji can see is Junpei, then Nanami, then Kugisaki. Another line of pain, right across his stomach, and then another on his calf.

Mahito got Kenjaku's text. The same text that Kenjaku had sent while Yuuji was standing *right next to him?* That text? Had Yuuji just fucking stood there as Kenjaku issued Fushiguro's execution order?

This time, the burning pain starts from Yuuji's wrist, then quickly works its way through his whole body. Is that what Idle Transfiguration feels like? Is that where Mahito touched Fushiguro: his right wrist? Had he cornered him at the Exchange Event, grabbed him as he tried to summon his shikigami?

Yuuji's going to throw up.

"I was hoping you'd tell me why Fushiguro Megumi was important," Kenjaku sighs. He looks *disappointed,* sitting there on a stranger's grave as Yuuji writhes in pain at his feet. "I wouldn't have paid him any mind if it wasn't for you, you know. Cursing his sister was more than enough leverage on Gojo Satoru already—I didn't need to go after him as well. But then *you* showed up, and...well, it's like I said. You need to see it from my perspective."

Kenjaku spreads his hands, almost imploringly. "Fushiguro Megumi was assigned to retrieve Sukuna's finger in Sendai. He would've been dispatched to Eishuu Detention Centre if Gojo Satoru hadn't pulled strings to go there himself instead. He was the common factor in everything you mentioned from the future, Yuuji, and—well—doesn't that just scream, *Fushiguro Megumi is important?* Of course I had to kill him. I do hope you understand."

Oh. So that's how it is.

Yuuji did this himself. He'd tried so hard to save Fushiguro that Kenjaku took notice. He basically drew a huge target on Fushiguro's back and said, *look here! I'm trying to save him!*

Yuuji's *really* going to throw up. Or he would, if it wasn't for the fact that gravity's currently crushing his throat so badly that he can't speak or swallow. And that's not even mentioning the fact that the echo of Fushiguro's death is making his vision go black and fuzzy at the edges. No matter what happens, he's not making it out of this cemetery alive.

Kenjaku looks down at him and clicks his tongue. "So it's one of those types of Vows, then," he says. "A shame that you have to die too. But if it makes you feel better, Yuuji, then think of it like this: Fushiguro Megumi was always going to die. He's a sorcerer, after all. That's what they do." He smiles wryly, one end of his mouth ticking upwards. "If you *really* wanted to save him, you should've gone back to the start."

He snaps his fingers, and the gravity on Yuuji gets about ten times worse. Forget not being able to speak—he's not even able to *breathe.* His ribs crack and splinter beneath his own body weight.

Kenjaku stands. He moves closer, and every nerve in Yuuji's body rebels as he crouches down by Yuuji's head. He reaches out, almost tenderly, and brushes Yuuji's hair out of his face.

"For what it's worth, Yuuji," Kenjaku says softly, "if you'd been working for me instead, I would've been proud."

In this timeline, Yuuji dies at his mother's feet, his rage like a rock in his throat.

Yuuji wakes up with someone's hand on his arm.

He jerks away instinctively. "Wha—"

"Hey!" someone says, and the voice is shockingly familiar. Yuuji startles, whipping around. "Yeesh, kid. You got a death wish or something?"

Yuuji stares.

It's Gojo. It's undeniably Gojo, white hair and blue eyes and all, but...

But he's *huge.* He towers over Yuuji, and Yuuji knows his teacher's tall, but he's not *this damn tall.* Yuuji barely comes up to his hip. And he's dressed differently too, not in the teacher's uniform but the *student* uniform, and...and...

And he looks younger.

His jaw is softer. His cheeks are rounder. He's got less lines (not that the Gojo Yuuji knows would ever admit to having lines). When he leans down to peer at Yuuji, his brow furrowed, he looks barely older than sixteen.

Gojo wags a finger in Yuuji's face. "What you just did? Not cool. Didn't anyone ever tell you to wait till the signal turns green?"

"Huh?" Yuuji says, and immediately jumps at the sound of his own voice. It's—it's high-pitched. It's squeaky. It's *young.*

Gojo points out to the side. Yuuji follows his finger and realises that they're standing at a pedestrian crossing—and also that everything else is *huge.* Yuuji's head barely comes up to the push button for the crossing. The buildings look like they brush the sky. The hedge next to him is the same height he is. And everyone around him is terrifyingly tall, just like Gojo.

No—everyone's not tall. It's Yuuji who's short. Not just short, but *tiny*—and when he looks down at himself, he sees skinny limbs, pudgy hands, a uniform that he hasn't worn in years...

"It's a pedestrian crossing, kid," Gojo says. "That little man there? You gotta wait for it to turn green before you go." He drags a hand down his face and looks around. "Where are your parents? I'm not cut out for another babysitting job. I've already got one lined up."

"Parents?" Yuuji croaks out, and the voice that he hears is the voice of a little kid. There's a terrible suspicion dawning upon him—he looks around and sees people wearing outdated clothes and haircuts. There's a woman nearby on her phone, but it's not a mobile phone. It's a flip phone.

Flip phone. Old clothes. Young Gojo. Young Yuuji. There's an obvious conclusion here, and it's terrifying.

"Yeah, your parents." Gojo taps his foot impatiently. "People who are meant to be taking care of you? People who are not me? Did you lose them or something?"

"Um," Yuuji says. He's starting to feel dizzy. "Maybe?"

Gojo groans. "Just my luck," he mutters, digging into his pocket and pulling out a phone. Another flip phone, even though Yuuji knows that Gojo makes it a point to get the latest phone models. "You know their numbers? Could you call one of them?"

"What year is it?" Yuuji asks. Gojo looks down at him and blinks. He's wearing sunglasses that Yuuji's never seen on him before: round ones, perched on the bridge of his nose. They're not quite as dark as the rectangular ones that the other Gojo—the *older* Gojo—wears. Yuuji can still see his eyes through them, just barely.

"The year...? Jeez, you're weird." Gojo flicks his phone open and holds it out to Yuuji. Yuuji stares at it blankly. "It's 2008. Now that I've answered your burning question, can you call your parents?"

2008. *2008.*

Yuuji went back *ten whole years.*

His head is spinning. He feels sick to his stomach.

Ten years. *Ten years.* He's five years old. He's five years old and Gojo's a student and—and—

"Kid—kid, please don't—oh, *come on—"*

Yuuji crouches down and hugs his knees, trying and failing to stave off the churning in his stomach. Then, like the five-year-old he is, he throws up right there on the pavement.

(And right on Gojo's shoes.)

Chapter End Notes

- baby yuuji coming up next! and he's met gojo! what could he possibly change in 2008, i wonder?

- this chapter really fought me. it went through about 3 major rewrites (the original featured a lot more kenjaku, like a LOT), and i'm still not happy with it, especially the kenjaku scene. hope you guys enjoyed anyway!

- to clarify: wasuke (yuuji's grandpa) never knew about jujutsu or kenjaku, but he always thought that something was off. after jin and kaori's deaths, wasuke moved to a small town, then back to sendai. he cut contact with kaori's family because he suspected that kaori's possessor was still alive. also, kaori was canonically capable of jujutsu. she had the innate technique of antigravity, which kenjaku used after her death (increased gravity is the reversed technique, so yes, kenjaku killed yuuji with his mother's technique here).

- i assume kenjaku was always, at some point, going to turn yuuji into sukuna's vessel. maybe one day i'll write an enemies to lovers itafushi au where yuuji meets kenjaku before megumi/gojo and becomes a curse user...

- i also hold the hc that, while most of kenjaku's CG victims were random, tsumiki was chosen intentionally as leverage against gojo.

- i am VERY excited for next chapter. grinning and cackling and rubbing my hands etc etc. ehehehe

- chapter title from lord huron's 'the night we met':
"And then I can tell myself
Not to ride along with you
I had all and then most of you
Some and now none of you
Take me back to the night we met"

Chapter 4: here and where you are

Chapter Notes

this is a bit of a slower one, because it's part 1 of a 2-part chapter! the original chapter 4 turned out to be huge, so i cut it in half.

in other news, this marks the beginning of my favourite chapter (or chapters, plural, now that i've split ch4). This is essentially an entire AU all by itself. buckle up :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's a beautiful sunny day and Yuuji is a horrible five-year-old.

Well. Technically, he's a fifteen-year-old in a five-year-old's body. That's why he's stolen Gojo's phone—Gojo's obviously trying to get rid of him, but Yuuji needs to stick with him for as long as possible so that he can figure out what's going on. So, when Gojo gave Yuuji his phone to call his parents, Yuuji just...took it.

He *was* thinking with his fifteen-year-old brain when he did that. He swears he was. It was strategic! It was thought out! It's just that, maybe...

Maybe his body's natural instincts are overriding his brain a bit. Maybe. Because as Gojo chases him down the sidewalk, yelling, Yuuji instinctively darts away. His red sneakers make little squeaking sounds as he runs. His schoolbag bounces on his back.

"Give it back, you little—"

"Nuh-uh!" Yuuji yells back. Gojo rakes a hand through his hair.

"What did I do to deserve this," he mutters, loud enough for Yuuji to hear. Yuuji swerves between two adults. Behind him, Gojo barrels through those same adults with his Infinity.

"Hey—!"

"Young man—"

"I've got a brat to catch!" Gojo shouts at them. Yuuji takes the opportunity to dash around a corner. He's fast—he's always been fast, he was a pain in his grandpa's ass growing up—but Gojo's legs are longer, and he's got cursed energy enhancing his speed, and he's also not seventy years old with bad knees like Yuuji's grandpa.

So, all in all, it's not really much of a surprise when Yuuji gets yanked backwards by his bag. The ground disappears as he's lifted up in the air, coming face-to-face with a scowling Gojo.

Yuuji instinctively clamps his hands over the phone as tight as he can, squirming and kicking his feet out to stop Gojo from snatching it back.

"Give me back my phone," Gojo growls, shaking Yuuji like a dog. He does it gently, though —not hard enough to actually rattle Yuuji.

"No," says Yuuji.

"Yes," says Gojo. He snaps his fingers. "I need that for something important. So just hand it over and tell me your parents' numbers, and we can never see each other again."

"Not until you tell me where we are!"

"Where we—? *What?"* Gojo stares at him, his mouth agape. "Oh my god. Don't tell me you're a runaway or something." He leans in to squint at the school logo on Yuuji's uniform shirt, mouthing the name of it in confusion. Yuuji thinks back to where he'd lived at this point in time: he'd been in a small village then, basically unknown to anyone except the locals. Judging from the look on Gojo's face, he's got no idea where Yuuji's school is meant to be.

"We're in Saitama city right now," Gojo says slowly. "Are *you* from Saitama?"

Yuuji shakes his head.

"...Kawaguchi?"

Another shake.

"Warabi?" Gojo asks, sounding slightly desperate. Yuuji shakes his head again.

"I'm from a town near Sendai," he informs him, and Gojo makes a choking sound.

"Sendai? How the hell..." He groans. "Okay, kid, you know what? How about you give me back my phone, and we give your parents a call, and then I...pass you off to some very nice policemen. The first policemen we can find. Yes?"

Yuuji sticks out his tongue. Gojo makes a cut-off sound that *might* be 'fuck this'. He reaches out, obviously intending to take his phone by force, and his Infinity brushes Yuuji's shirt.

It's nothing serious—just the lightest pressure, an invisible force on Yuuji's chest. But some sort of survival instinct kicks in, and Yuuji's heart dials the speed up a notch or two. He yelps and pushes back with his own cursed energy, and Gojo immediately freezes.

The Infinity retreats. Gojo is silent and unmoving, his hand like a vice on Yuuji's bag. Yuuji dangles there in the air, feeling uncomfortably like he's been caught stealing or something; around them, other pedestrians stroll past, with some of them shooting odd looks in Yuuji and Gojo's direction.

"Hey, kid," Gojo says slowly. "What's your name?"

"...Itadori Yuuji."

"Itadori Yuuji," Gojo repeats, his brow furrowing. Yuuji knows for a fact that the name *Itadori* has never, in any way, been affiliated with sorcery. Gojo lowers him to the ground, then crouches down so that they're on each other's eye level.

"Quick question, Yuuji-kun," he says. "Do you see ghosts?"

What should Yuuji do? Should he play dumb? No—it's probably for the best if Gojo knows he's a sorcerer. It'll keep his interest piqued, and then Yuuji can find out whatever's got Gojo hanging around Saitama, and why it's so important that Yuuji got dropped into existence right next to him. So Yuuji nods mutely. Gojo's mouth twitches.

"Right," he says. "Another question: do you know what jujutsu sorcery is?"

Yuuji nods again.

"Interesting," Gojo says. He tilts his head so that his glasses slide down his nose a little, revealing just the slightest sliver of his eyes. "Very interesting. Now, last question: did someone ask you to come up to me?"

Yuuji blinks. *Huh?* Why would Gojo even think of that? Why would anyone get some random kid to go up to Gojo anyway?

"No," Yuuji says, nonplussed.

"You can tell me if they did," Gojo adds. His voice is light, but his eyes are fixed on Yuuji with an intensity that makes Yuuji's skin crawl. "You won't get in trouble."

"No one told me to come up to you," Yuuji insists. Gojo studies him for a second longer, then shrugs.

"Alright then! I believe you, Yuuji-kun." He stands up, seemingly casual, but Yuuji sees how he does a quick scan of the street and rooftops around them. Huh. Yuuji's never considered that there was once a time where Gojo would've had to look around with his actual eyes instead of just letting Infinity filter everything for him. Of course, Infinity's still on; Yuuji can feel it, a constant thrum of cursed energy. When he looks down at Gojo's shoes, he finds them untouched by his little freakout throw-up session from earlier.

"Tell you what, Yuuji-kun," Gojo says, tilting his head to peer down at Yuuji again. "Forget about the policemen. You can come with me instead. I've got an errand to run first, though, so you'll have to wait for me to finish that. Deal?"

That's exactly what Yuuji was hoping to hear, so he nods. The 'errand' is probably just a mission, and once that's done, then Yuuji can figure out why the universe decided it was a good idea to put him next to teenage Gojo. This time, when Gojo holds out his hand expectantly, Yuuji gives him back his phone.

Gojo leads him down the street, one hand hovering in the air behind Yuuji's back as if to keep him from running away. To an outsider, it probably looks like he's being kidnapped, but Yuuji

trots along obediently. At his side, Gojo is unnervingly silent; he keeps glancing down at Yuuji, and there's something sharp about his gaze that makes Yuuji shiver.

"You're a pretty quiet kid, Yuuji-kun," Gojo remarks, after their third street spent in silence. Yuuji startles a little.

"Um," he says. It's the first time he's ever heard anyone call him *quiet*. "I guess?"

Gojo hums. "You should fix that," he says. "Kids your age are meant to be loud."

"Okay."

"I mean that!"

"Okay."

Gojo huffs. "Listen to your elders when they're giving you advice, Yuuji-kun. How old are you, anyway?"

Yuuji holds up five fingers. Gojo raises his brows.

"You're about the same age as him, then," he mutters, seemingly to himself. Yuuji ignores it. They walk another few streets, and the pedestrians around them start thinning out as they wander into the more residential areas. The sun is starting to set; the sky above them turns a brilliant gold.

"When we get to where we're headed," Gojo says abruptly a few minutes later, "it's best if you stay out of sight. I don't want him thinking I'm collecting kids or something."

"Him?"

"The kid I'm going to meet." Gojo pushes his glasses up his nose and looks around. They're practically alone on the street now. "He's like you. He sees ghosts and everything. I owe his dad a favour...ah, it's a long story. And it's none of your business anyway."

He takes a left, leading them between two apartment buildings. Yuuji hunches his shoulders a bit. It doesn't look like the best of areas—there's trash lying around, and the buildings all look a little run-down. A stray cat, mangy and thin, watches them warily from the top of one of the walls. Finally, Gojo comes to a stop at the mouth of an alley and pulls out a piece of paper from his pocket. He unfolds it, revealing a few scant lines of text and a photo of—

Yuuji's heart skips a beat.

That's *Fushiguro.* It's a grainy, low-quality photo of him, and he's ten years younger than the Fushiguro Yuuji knows, but that head of spiky hair is unmistakeable. All at once, the pieces click together in Yuuji's head.

Gojo's going to meet a boy. A kid. A kid who can see curses, a kid with a cursed technique, a kid whose father is involved somehow—Gojo is going to meet *Fushiguro.*

Everything makes sense now. Today must be the day that Gojo and Fushiguro met for the first time. And, going off of what little Fushiguro's told him about his childhood with Gojo, this is probably also the day that Fushiguro sold himself to sorcery forever.

For a second, Kenjaku's voice echoes in Yuuji's head: *if you really wanted to save him, you should've gone back to the start.*

That was one of the last things Yuuji heard before he died. He didn't even realise, but the words must have stuck in his head, because this—*this* is the start. This is what Kenjaku meant. *Fushiguro Megumi was always going to die. He's a sorcerer, after all. That's what they do.*

But what if Fushiguro *wasn't* a sorcerer?

Slowly, with shaking hands, Yuuji reaches out to point at the photo. Gojo turns to him at the movement.

"Hm? What's up, Yuuji-kun?"

"That kid." Yuuji fights to keep his hand steady. Gojo's hand jerks up, as if on instinct, to cover the photo. "Why're you meeting him?"

"Like I said, Yuuji-kun, it's none of your business," Gojo says, tutting. "But, ah...Megumi-kun here is a bit special. I'm here to help him make a decision."

"A decision?"

"On whether or not he wants to stay with his bigshot sorcerer family. If you ask me, I think he should leave 'em. They suck. He can come be a sorcerer with me instead." Gojo folds up the paper and stuffs it back into his pocket. "It's nothing you have to worry about, Yuuji-kun. Like I said, you just have to stay out of sight until I'm done talking."

So this is the choice that Fushiguro was given—to be a sorcerer with the Zen'in or a sorcerer with Gojo. It worked out for him in the end, but...he would've become a sorcerer no matter what he picked.

Yuuji feels slightly nauseous. Gojo is skimming the buildings that they pass, obviously watching for a specific address.

"And—" Yuuji's voice shakes a bit. "And what if he doesn't want to be a sorcerer?"

Gojo snorts. "Of course he'll want to be a sorcerer. He's strong, like me. He's got a good technique."

"But what if he doesn't?" Yuuji presses. He can still see Fushiguro in his mind, on that summer night in Sendai, the faintest shadow of jealousy flitting across his face as he looked at Yuuji. *I didn't get a choice,* he'd said back then. "Can you ask him?"

Gojo squints down at him. There's a hint of suspicion there, in how he looks down at Yuuji with his eyes heavy and unmoving. "Why do you want me to ask him, Yuuji-kun? You seem

to care an awful lot."

Yuuji swallows. He looks down at the ground and wraps his hands around the straps of his bag. His right hand slides down automatically to play with the loose part of the bag strap—a habit that Yuuji grew out of in middle school, but it seems like the instincts of his five-year-old body are taking over.

"I dunno," he says, keeping his eyes trained on a weed that's pushing its way out of the concrete. "I just feel bad for him."

Above him, Gojo says nothing. His shadow is a long line in front of Yuuji, an unmoving silhouette.

"I see," he finally says, and Yuuji breathes a sigh of relief when he pivots around and starts walking again. "Well, Yuuji-kun, we're almost there. Go find a wall or something to hide behind, alright?"

Yuuji nods. True to his word, Gojo stops just two alleyways later, staring down at something —some*one*—that Yuuji can't see from his position behind Gojo. Gojo glances back at him and waves his hand behind his back: *go hide.* Yuuji obediently creeps over to duck behind a neighbouring wall as Gojo advances into the alley.

As Yuuji tiptoes behind the wall, he hears Gojo's footsteps echoing. Then—

"You're Fushiguro Megumi-kun, right?"

The scuff of another, smaller pair of footsteps, as their owner comes to a halt.

"Who're you? And what's with the face?"

Yuuji's breath catches in his throat.

Fushiguro's there. He's *right there,* separated from Yuuji by nothing but a crumbling concrete wall. Suddenly, Yuuji wants nothing more than to see him. The desperation swells up in him, choking him, and he looks around wildly to see if there's—a crack, a hole, *something* that he can look through to see Fushiguro's face—

There. In an area like this, the walls are all falling apart a little, so Yuuji's not surprised to see a small hole in the wall. As Gojo yammers on about something to do with Fushiguro's dad, Yuuji crouches down in front of the hole. He brushes aside bits of plaster and dirt from the weeds growing over it, then peers through it into the alleyway, his heart in his throat.

Fushiguro is standing there, as tiny as Yuuji, his hair as adorably spiky as ever. Gojo towers over him, his hands in his pockets; Fushiguro is eyeing him with no small amount of suspicion.

A wave of relief and fondness washes up in Yuuji, so fierce that he has to press a chubby fist against his mouth to keep from making a sound. *Hi,* he thinks, desperate and useless. *Hi, Fushiguro.*

"You have the ability to see the unseen, and you can manipulate it too, right?" Gojo's saying. It's a lot fancier than how he asked Yuuji. "I bet you've manifested your cursed technique, too. Anyway..." He raises his hands, which does nothing to disprove the fact that he looks like a weirdo creep right now. "The Zen'in clan *loves* talent like that. Most cursed techniques show up between four and six—a great time to sell!"

To *sell?* Yuuji's heart drops right into the bottom of his stomach. Was that the deal with Fushiguro's father? Jeez, this just keeps getting worse and worse.

Gojo spreads his arms. "You, my dear Megumi-kun," he says, grinning, "are your dad's ace against the Zen'in clan. Pisses you off, doesn't it?" He steps closer, crouching down to Fushiguro's level. "So, I took care of that dad of yours by—"

"I don't care," Fushiguro interrupts bluntly. Gojo cuts himself off. "I don't care where he is or what he's doing. Haven't seen him in years. Barely remember his face. But I get the gist from what you just said."

He says it all calmly, mechanically, like he's recited it before a million times. Yuuji's heart aches for him. He's, what—six? Yeah, six. And he hasn't seen his dad in *years?*

Above their heads, a nearby balcony door slides open. All three of them—Yuuji, Fushiguro, Gojo—look up as a girl steps out, leaning against the railing. It's a girl that Yuuji recognises, if only barely.

"Oh!" Tsumiki says, her voice carrying on the wind a little. "Megumi's back!"

"Tsumiki's mother hasn't come home in a while either," Fushiguro says as he looks up at her, and Yuuji furrows his brow. So...who *is* at home, then? Was Fushiguro raised by his grandparents like Yuuji and Kugisaki were? "That means they're done with us and are off living happily somewhere else."

He turns away from Gojo, kicking at a little rock. Gojo stares at him for a moment. From this far away, Yuuji can't read his face at all.

"Are you really a first grader?" Gojo mutters, then shakes his head and pushes himself to his feet. "Well, whatever. If you ever get curious about your dad, just ask me. I think you'll find it interesting. Now, on to the main point: what do you want to do?" He tilts his head, looking down at Fushiguro. "Do you want to go to the Zen'in clan?"

Fushiguro pauses, then turns back around. "What'll happen to Tsumiki?" he asks, and Yuuji instinctively glances back up. Tsumiki is still standing on the balcony, her arms crossed over the railing; she's watching Fushiguro and Gojo with a furrow in her brow. "Will Tsumiki be happy there? It all depends on that."

"No," Gojo says sharply. It's so sudden, so *certain,* that both Yuuji and Fushiguro recoil a bit. "One-hundred-percent no. That, I can assure you."

Fushiguro takes a step back, his mouth flattening out. He looks intensely uncomfortable, scanning Gojo up and down, but Gojo just cracks a grin.

"Okay!" he says, and claps his hands. "You can leave it to me, then." He pauses, and Yuuji's heart sinks. Is that it, then? Is this all the choice that Fushiguro gets?

But Gojo hesitates. His eyes flicker sideways—and, for one terrifying second, he meets Yuuji's gaze. Yuuji freezes, feeling like he's being held in place, only for Gojo to look away again almost immediately.

Then Gojo heaves a sigh and reaches up to rub at the back of his head. "Actually, Megumi-kun, there's another option," he says, and Yuuji's eyes widen. "You could also just choose to live a normal, boring life."

"A normal life?" Fushiguro repeats suspiciously. Gojo shrugs and gestures around at the alley they're standing in.

"You wouldn't be a sorcerer," he says. "You'd live the exact same way you are now, but, ah...I guess I'd help you out a bit." Gojo looks up at where Tsumiki stands on the balcony. "You said your mother hasn't come home in a while?"

"Tsumiki's mother," Fushiguro corrects. Yuuji feels a little burst of surprise at that. Are Fushiguro and Tsumiki step-siblings? At least that explains why they don't look alike. "I told you, she and my dad ran off."

Gojo tilts his head. "So who's taking care of you and Tsumiki-chan?"

"Tsumiki," Fushiguro answers instantly. Yuuji feels something cold coil in his stomach. No grandparents? No uncles or aunts? No *anyone?*

"Tsumiki," Gojo repeats. "No one else?"

Fushiguro hunches his shoulders. "Okada-baa-san from downstairs cooks us food sometimes."

"Right." Gojo taps his fingers rapidly on his knee. "And that's it?"

"Yeah," Fushiguro says defensively. "Why does it matter?"

"Oh, no reason. No reason at all." Gojo's voice sounds a little strained. "So, ah...what'll it be, Megumi-kun? Not the Zen'in, as we've said. So you can either come be a sorcerer like me, or stay how you are. I'd teach you the basics of sorcery, obviously, but nothing other than that."

"Which one would be better for Tsumiki?"

Gojo purses his lips. "For someone like her, they're about the same."

Fushiguro is quiet for a second. He looks down at the ground, shifting on his feet. Yuuji watches him and thinks: *please. Please, pick the safe option.*

"...I don't want to be a sorcerer," Fushiguro finally admits, his voice quieter than it was before. Yuuji's heart leaps up into his throat, sick with hope. "If it's all the same for Tsumiki, then—I don't."

Gojo is silent for a long moment. He tilts his head back to look at the sky and exhales, slow.

"Well, that'll be more work for me," he murmurs, before rolling his head to look down at Fushiguro again. Fushiguro looks back at him, fierce, but Yuuji can see the hint of fear in his eyes.

Gojo stares at Fushiguro for a few heartbeats. Then, suddenly, he slaps his thigh and flashes Fushiguro a thumbs-up.

"Okay!" he says loudly. His voice bounces off the alley walls. "That's settled, then. Don't worry about it, alright, Megumi-kun? I'll take care of things." He plants a hand on Fushiguro's head with enough force that Fushiguro's cheeks puff out a little. "You just focus on whatever it is they're teaching you in first grade. Very important, I'm sure."

He turns around without further ado, waving a hand behind his head in a goodbye to Fushiguro. But, right as he turns, his eye slides sideways—looking right at Yuuji.

Shit. He's definitely seen him.

Yuuji slinks out from the wall and meets Gojo at the mouth of the alley. He tries to peer behind Gojo's legs, but Fushiguro's already disppeared. Tsumiki's not on the balcony, either.

Above his head, Gojo tuts and leans down. "It's not nice to eavesdrop, Yuuji-kun," he says, before delivering a flick to Yuuji's forehead. Yuuji yelps and claps both hands to it. "How much did you hear?"

"Everything," Yuuji admits, feeling his face go warm. Gojo sighs melodramatically.

"I don't think Megumi-kun would be too pleased to hear that," he says, clicking his tongue. He starts to walk, beckoning Yuuji to follow him. "Now, Yuuji-kun, let me ask you the same question: what do you want to do?"

Yuuji looks up at him. God, he really is tall. "Huh?"

"You've got cursed energy," Gojo says, tilting his head. "A decent amount of it, too, for your age. If your parents agree, we could work out a deal for you to come be a sorcerer when you're older." He reaches up to fiddle with his glasses. "Unless, of course, someone's already talked to you about it."

Theres definitely *some* kind of implication there, but Yuuji's still too inexperienced with the jujutsu world to know what it is. Does Gojo think he's affiliated with the clans somehow, or is it something else? Or is it just normal for sorcerer kids to get snapped up young?

Yuuji's got no idea, so he goes with the truth: "Nope," he says, kicking at a pebble on the ground. He watches it go skittering ahead of him.

"No one's ever talked to you about this?"

Yuuji shakes his head.

"Shame," Gojo says. Yuuji can't read his tone at all. He can't read Gojo in general—his presence isn't comforting and safe like Yuuji's used to. *This* Gojo makes Yuuji feel like he's constantly being scrutinized. It's not fun. "So, Yuuji-kun. *Do* you want to be a sorcerer?"

It's the same question that Fushiguro *and* Gojo asked him in the last couple of timelines, only it's ten years early. Yuuji's answer, of course, is the same; he shakes his head, then looks up at the setting sun.

His grandpa's probably home from work by now. If he hasn't already gotten a call from the school about Yuuji's absence, then he'll find out when he sees the house is empty. He's probably freaking out. The thought makes Yuuji feel sick with guilt—and, suddenly, he's no longer fifteen years old and trying to save his best friend. Suddenly, he feels very much like he's five, and he wants his grandpa to be here.

"I wanna go home," he tells Gojo quietly, shuffling his feet. The words stick in his throat. There's a bit more truth to them than he expects.

Gojo pauses. "Home?"

Yuuji nods.

"...I don't know where 'home' is, Yuuji-kun. You'll have to show me."

So Yuuji does. Everything looks different when he's small, but when Gojo asks him to point out his town on a map, he's able to do it. Gojo asks if he'd like to take the train; Yuuji, who's currently way too short to read any of the signs, shakes his head.

"Right, then," Gojo says, interlacing his fingers and stretching them. "You wanna see something cool, Yuuji-kun?"

His 'something cool' is teleporting them halfway across the country. He does it without warning, and Yuuji screams his little lungs out. It's not his first time getting teleported by Gojo, but it feels way more terrifying when he's tiny and no one listens to him and all that he can rely on is Gojo's grip on his collar.

They land on the outskirts of Yuuji's town. It's already dark, and it takes Yuuji a second to get his bearings; it's been years since he was last here, after all. But once he sees the park where he once dropped his slime, he knows exactly where he is, and it feels like instinct takes over—he starts running towards his old house, so fast that he stumbles over his own feet and Gojo barks out a "Hey!"

There—*there,* his house, with the lights on inside. It has a little garden gate that Yuuji had loved to swing on; he'd missed it badly when they moved back to Sendai. He pushes past it now, listening to it creak, and practically scrambles up the steps to the door.

Gojo catches up to him seconds later and reaches over to ring the doorbell. Yuuji can see a shadow moving around inside. Gojo waits about five seconds before ringing again.

There's a clatter, and then the stomping of familiar footsteps. Yuuji stares up, wide-eyed, as the door swings open to reveal his frantic-looking grandfather.

He glares at Gojo. "Who the hell are—"

"Found something of yours," Gojo chirps back cheerfully, pointing down at Yuuji. Yuuji's grandpa looks down, and his eyes go wide.

"Yuuji!" he barks, sweeping Yuuji up into his arms and grabbing his chin. Yuuji, who hasn't been picked up by his grandpa in years, is too stunned to speak. His grandfather turns his head this way and that, scanning for injuries.

"Where on earth have you been?" he demands, Gojo entirely forgotten. "Do you have any idea how worried I've been? Are you alright?"

And Yuuji—tired, wrung-out, and feeling overwhelmingly five years old—just buries his face in his grandpa's shoulder and bursts into tears.

Gojo stays for dinner.

He makes up some story for Yuuji about getting on the wrong train in the morning. Yuuji doesn't take the train to school—the town is so small that it's barely a ten minute walk away—but, when his grandpa looks at him for confirmation, Yuuji just nods along. He'll just say he got curious about the trains or something. If he remembers right, he had a thing for big metal vehicles at this age because he thought the clanking sounded cool.

Yuuji's not entirely sure how Gojo ends up convincing his grandpa into letting him stay. Anyone else would've been kicked out the second Yuuji was returned. But Gojo does some sweet-talking, some wheedling, and suddenly he's sitting across from Yuuji at the dinner table with the light casting odd shadows on his face.

"This looks delicious, Itadori-san," he says genially, as Yuuji's grandpa places a dish of steaming curry and rice in front of him. Yuuji's grandpa grunts in response.

"Shut up and eat, brat."

"Yes sir! Itadakimasu!" Gojo gives Yuuji's grandpa a little salute and tucks in. Yuuji pushes his own food around his plate. He feels queasy. This is something he never expected—Gojo and his grandfather, like two worlds colliding and blowing themselves up.

His grandpa reaches over and nudges Yuuji's plate closer. "Don't play with your food, Yuuji. Eat."

Yuuji ducks his head in a nod. He can feel Gojo watching him across the table, even through the glasses.

For the rest of dinner, the only sound is the scraping of their spoons against the bowls. Gojo finishes eating first; he puts his utensils down and pushes his bowl away, then clears his throat.

"I actually wanted to speak to you about Yuuji-kun, Itadori-san," he says. "And his future in sorcery."

Yuuji's heart plummets right to the bottom of his stomach.

He watched his grandfather's brow furrow. "Sorcery? What is that? What's it got to do with Yuuji?"

It's just as Yuuji thought: his grandpa doesn't know a thing about jujutsu. He might've suspected something about Kenjaku, but it doesn't change the fact that he's got no clue about sorcerers and curses. Gojo looks between Yuuji and his grandfather for a second, silent.

Yuuji knows what sorcery is; Yuuji's grandfather does not. To Gojo, that must seem strange. Yuuji swallows and reaches out to wrap his hands around his cup in an effort to ground himself.

"One question, Itadori-san," Gojo says lightly, resting his elbows on the table and leaning forwards. "Has Yuuji-kun here ever told you that he sees ghosts? Any strange events? Apparitions? Monsters?"

Five-year-old Yuuji never would've noticed, but fifteen-year-old Yuuji catches it: the flicker of recognition in his grandfather's eyes. His grandpa's knuckles go white on his cutlery for a moment.

"Never," he says firmly, his eyes fixed on Gojo. "Gojo-kun, was it?"

"That's me."

"Are you related to Kaori?"

Gojo's brows jump up his forehead. "...Kaori?"

"Her family name was Saito."

"Saito Kaori..." Gojo taps his fingers on the table, an irregular rhythm. Above his head, the kitchen light flickers. "No, I can't say that I'm familiar. Why?"

"No reason." Yuuji's grandfather sits back in his seat, crossing his arms. The atmosphere's changed now, tense on both sides; Gojo and Yuuji's grandpa both watch each other warily. Yuuji stares down at his unfinished dinner and kicks his feet in the air, since he's short enough that they don't touch the ground yet when he sits down.

Gojo clears his throat. "So, just to set things straight," he says. "You've never heard of jujutsu sorcery?"

Yuuji's grandpa narrows his eyes. "What are you, a monk?" he demands. "Sorcery? Tch. I don't want that kind of thing near Yuuji."

Gojo's eyes flicker to Yuuji, a brief flash of blue from behind his glasses. "Right," he says slowly. "Of course. My apologies." Then he turns back to Yuuji's grandpa and flashes him a smile. "Well! If that's how you feel, then I think I've taken up enough of your time. Thanks for having me for dinner, Itadori-san."

Gojo tries to help clear the dishes for dinner, but Yuuji's grandpa swats him away and tells him to stop meddling. "Yuuji, take him to the door," he says, nudging Yuuji towards the hallway with his foot. Yuuji nods and slides out of his chair, walking to the front door. Gojo follows him silently. He reminds Yuuji of a big cat: a white tiger in the hallway, tracking Yuuji intently with his eyes.

"So, Yuuji-kun," Gojo says casually, as they reach the door. Yuuji's not tall enough to unlock it—he has to drag over the little stool that his grandpa keeps in the corner for him, a plastic blue thing with a faded cartoon duck design. "Who told you about jujutsu sorcery?"

Yuuji clambers up onto the stool and fiddles with the lock. This lock is rusty—it has to be jiggled just right to get it to unlock, but it's been so long since Yuuji lived here that his little kiddy fingers fumble. "Dunno," he says, deciding to fall back on the lie he's been using since he found out about Kenjaku. "My mom, I think."

"Your mother?" Gojo reaches out and unlocks the door with a flick of his finger and a pulse of cursed energy. The door swings open with a creak. "Let me guess: Saito Kaori? Your grandpa didn't seem to like her."

Yuuji shrugs, hopping back off his stool. Gojo steps forward and slides his shoes on, peering out into the purple night.

"You're an interesting kid, Yuuji-kun," he says, glancing down at Yuuji as he moves out onto the doorstep. "Like I said, you've got a decent amount of cursed energy. You could be a real good sorcerer if we got you trained." He looks back over his shoulder, as if double-checking that Yuuji's grandpa is still cleaning up from dinner, then leans down.

"I'll come back and check on you every now and then, yeah?" he says, sliding his glasses down his nose and shooting Yuuji a wink. "Just in case you change your mind."

He doesn't wait for Yuuji's answer, straightening up and making to move away. Irrational panic flashes in Yuuji's chest, and he can't help but stumble forward. "Wait!" he blurts out, and Gojo pauses to look down at him.

Yuuji opens his mouth. He can't help but feel like he can't just let Gojo go—not when he knows everything will go wrong in ten years' time. Not when he knows that Gojo's life has got a timer. He *has* to let Gojo know, to tell him *something,* but...

But what can Yuuji even say?

He barely knows anything about Gojo's life. He doesn't know what happened in the years before they met. He could say something about Kenjaku, but Yuuji has no idea where he is at the moment. He could say something about Shibuya, but Gojo's probably going to forget about it by the time it rolls around. He could say something about Geto Suguru, but...Yuuji doesn't even know who the guy *is,* only that Kenjaku took his body. Were he and Gojo even friends? According to what little information Panda gave him, Geto was a curse user and a terrorist for years before Gojo killed him—Yuuji's got no idea who he was before that, or how he and Gojo know each other.

So, in the end, Yuuji just swallows and says, "Be careful, Gojo-san. Um. With your friends, and stuff."

Gojo's right hand twitches at his side, a little instinctive spasm. Yuuji watches him tuck it behind his back, even as he lets out a light laugh. "Alright, Yuuji-kun," he says, ruffling Yuuji's hair with his other hand. Yuuji knows, with a sinking feeling in his stomach, that Gojo's not really listening to him. "I'll keep that in mind, yeah? And *you* keep *me* in mind, when you're older and you wanna be a sorcerer."

Yuuji doesn't respond. Gojo doesn't seem to mind—he lifts his hand in goodbye the exact same way he did with Fushiguro, then turns and strolls casually down the garden path. Before he can get to the gate that Yuuji likes so much, the air around him twists and warps, and he disappears between one blink and the next. Yuuji stares at the space where he was and feels sick.

"He's gone already?" Yuuji's grandpa comes up behind him, one hand resting on his shoulder. "Hmph. Good riddance. People like him, talking about sorcery and wearing sunglasses indoors...oi, Yuuji. Look at me."

Yuuji obediently looks up. It's been a very long time since he was able to look up at his grandpa like this.

"If you ever see a ghost," his grandfather says, his voice suddenly quiet and deadly serious, "I want you to ignore it. Don't even look at it. Pretend it's not there. And if that Gojo boy visits again, I don't want you going near him. If he comes and I'm not home, you have to call me."

"'Kay, Jii-chan."

"And *no more catching the train without me."*

"'Kay, Jii-chan."

"Brat," his grandpa says, tweaking Yuuji's ear fondly. "Come on. Get inside."

The world keeps turning. After that night, Yuuji half-expects to see Gojo waiting at his door when he comes home from school the next day, but he's not there. He's not there the next day either, or the next, and eventually Yuuji just figures that Gojo probably forgot about the random sorcerer kid he met in Saitama one day.

Yuuji's grandpa moves them to Sendai less than a year later. If Gojo ever does come back, then he does it after Yuuji's already gone.

Time passes strangely.

Yuuji grows up, but he only sees it in stages—he blinks and months have passed, sliding away like water through cupped hands. He guesses that there's some kind of incompatibility with his fifteen-year-old brain and five-year-old body. The *real* Yuuji of this timeline, the younger one, takes over most of the time. Fifteen-year-old Yuuji, sorcerer-Yuuji, loves-Fushiguro Yuuji—that Yuuji just sort of lies dormant, only surfacing every now and again. He starts to see more of what's going on as he gets older, and the gap between his mind and his body shrinks.

His grandpa still gets cancer. Yuuji tries to urge him to eat better, to exercise more, but in the end it does nothing. The diagnosis happens exactly as Yuuji remembers. His grandfather rejects the treatment, just like he did the first time, and he's hospitalised just a few months later.

By the time Yuuji reaches his last year of middle school, he's almost entirely present in his mind. It's just like he remembers—he has all the same friends, all the same teachers. It isn't until March rolls around, and Yuuji realises his fourteenth birthday is approaching, that he remembers what Kenjaku had told him.

On March 18th, last year, I cursed Fushiguro Tsumiki in Saiko Doman Green Park, Saitama.

The realisation is like lightning down Yuuji's spine. Tsumiki: her being cursed was the beginning of the end for Fushiguro. The moment she's cursed, she's gone—she'll either stay in a coma forever or get taken over by Yorozu. And now...and now...

And now Yuuji is here, just weeks away from the date Kenjaku cursed her.

He can save her.

He knows what she looks like. He knows where it happened. If he goes to Saitama on March 18th, then he can track down Kenjaku and stop him from cursing her. Yuuji can *save her.* He can stop one of the single worst events of Fushiguro's life from happening.

It'll be a gamble, of course, because he'll be running the risk of meeting Fushiguro—and if it's to do with Tsumiki, then Fushiguro will remember him for life. But if it saves her, then it will be worth it. If it saves Tsumiki, then it saves Fushiguro, and that will always be worth it.

So, two days before his fourteenth birthday, Yuuji skips school and catches a southbound train.

He arrives in Saitama just a little past noon. It's a school day, so Tsumiki won't be walking around for a while yet; Yuuji dedicates the time he's got now to looking around for Kenjaku. He heads straight to Saiko Doman Green Park and patrols its boundaries, spreading out his senses as far as he can. He's nowhere near as skilled as Gojo or even Fushiguro in sensing cursed energy, but Kenjaku's cursed energy was what killed him in his last timeline—he's hoping that he'll at least be able to pick it out in a crowd.

At half past two, Yuuji senses it: a flash of cursed energy on the periphery of his senses, like a fish slipping in and out of his hands. He follows it to the edge of a blue lake, where people mill about aimlessly, sitting at picnic tables and chatting or simply sitting by the water. For a second, he doesn't see Kenjaku at all. There's no man in a monk outfit, no tall stranger sticking out over the crowd. But then a woman standing by a nearby tree turns, gazing out over the water, and Yuuji's breath catches in his chest.

There. That's him—or her, in this case. Yuuji's never seen Kenjaku in anyone but Geto Suguru's body, but those stitches are unmistakable. In this body, Kenjaku is a middle-aged woman, with glasses and lines around her eyes; her dyed-brown hair is pulled back into a severe bun. An office worker, by the looks of it.

Yuuji follows Kenjaku as she wanders further along the lake's edge. For the most part, she looks like a totally normal citizen. Yuuji keeps hidden, trailing her, one eye on his watch. The schools have just ended for the day. Any moment now, Kenjaku will probably stumble upon Tsumiki, and then...

Somehow, when it happens, it still catches Yuuji off-guard.

He sees Tsumiki first. She looks just like she did when Yorozu possessed her—hair in a neat ponytail, a gentle smile on her face. She's dressed in a high school uniform, and she's wearing a pair of wired earphones. She gazes out over the water as she walks. She looks peaceful. Happy.

In another life, this would be the day her life ended.

Yuuji won't let that happen this time. He watches, tense, as Kenjaku slips a hand into her pocket and pulls out a brightly-wrapped mint—no, a *tooth.* Yorozu's tooth. She's going to do something to get Tsumiki's attention, and then she'll pass Tsumiki the tooth, and once Tsumiki eats it it'll all be over. Yuuji watches as Kenjaku curls her fingers over the tooth with one hand, and with the other—

Right as an oncoming cyclist is about to pass Tsumiki, Kenjaku surreptitiously flicks a finger behind her back. The bike's front wheel suddenly slams into the ground—gravity—and the cyclist goes skidding out of control, right towards Tsumiki. Tsumiki's eyes widen. Kenjaku moves forward, one hand already outstretched to pull her out of harm's way—

Yuuji gets there first.

He sprints past Kenjaku and grabs Tsumiki by the shoulder, yanking her out of the cyclist's path. They both stumble onto the grass, unhurt; the cyclist crashes to the ground a few metres away. Kenjaku stands frozen in the path, one hand still raised.

Tsumiki yanks her earphones out. "What—"

"Sorry," Yuuji pants. His heart is beating double-time in his chest. He turns to Tsumiki, and blinks a little when he finds that she's a bit taller than him; he hasn't hit his end-of-middle-school growth spurt yet. "Are you okay, miss?"

"I'm fine," Tsumiki says, looking absolutely bewildered. "I—thank you." She looks around, at where the cyclist is groaning as they extricate themself from under their bike, and promptly rushes over to help. Yuuji follows her, one eye still on Kenjaku; Kenjaku, he knows, is watching him back.

I know you, Yuuji.

Yuuji's practically his father's twin—there's no way Kenjaku *doesn't* know who he is. When Kenjaku comes around to help them lift the bike off the cyclist, Yuuji pretends he doesn't see her. He ignores her until the cyclist is confirmed to be fine, and Kenjaku turns to Tsumiki with an outstretched palm.

"Here," she says kindly. "A mint, for the nerves. I find that they help after sudden shocks like that."

"Oh—thank you. That's very kind." Tsumiki takes Yorozu's tooth with a smile and a little half-bow—there's the tiniest spark of cursed energy as her fingers brush Kenjaku's palm, and Yuuji has to bite down on a gasp. Kenjaku nods at Tsumiki, then at Yuuji; she holds Yuuji's gaze for a moment before she turns away. Yuuji watches her go warily, only to snap back to attention at the sound of a crinkling wrapper beside him.

He whips his head around. "Wait!"

Tsumiki pauses, looking down at him. The tooth is half-unwrapped in her hands, brilliantly white. "Yes?"

"You—uh—" Yuuji stammers. "You shouldn't eat that."

Tsumiki furrows her brow. "This?" she asks, holding up the tooth. "Why not?"

Shit. Yuuji didn't think this through. He coughs, trying to think of a lie. Poison? No, that's dumb. Drugs? Still dumb, plus it sounds paranoid. What else, what else—

"You know how you're not meant to take candy from strangers?" he blurts out, and then immediately wants to slap himself in the face. Seriously? *That's* what he comes up with?

Tsumiki's mouth quirks up at one end in a little half-smile. For a second, Yuuji feels like the breath gets knocked out of him—Fushiguro does that exact same half-smile when he finds something funny, though of course, for him, it's rare. Suddenly, as Yuuji looks at Tsumiki, he misses Fushiguro so badly that it hurts.

"I *have* heard that before," Tsumiki acknowledges, looking down at the tooth. "I guess it would be safer to not eat it."

Yuuji rubs at the nape of his neck. "Yeah, well." He shrugs. "It's a crazy world out there. Also, those stitches on that woman's forehead, um—I heard it's a yakuza thing. They mark themselves like that to identify each other. So look out for that too, miss."

Tsumiki looks like she's trying to fight a laugh. "I'll keep that in mind, too," she says. "Thank you...?"

"Itadori."

"Itadori-san," Tsumiki acknowledges, giving him a shallow bow. "And thank you for pulling me away from the bike as well."

Yuuji waves a hand. "It was nothing, really. You're okay?"

"I'm okay."

"Cool. Great." Yuuji coughs, rocking back on his heels a little. "Um. Have a good day, miss."

"You too, Itadori-san." Tsumiki's still smiling when she turns away, continuing on her walk. Yuuji watches like a hawk as she holds up the tooth and finishes unwrapping it. If she tries to eat it again, he'll have to forcefully take it from her, which will lead to a lot of explanations that he'd rather not give.

But Tsumiki doesn't eat it. She studies it for a moment, and then, without further ado, she tosses it into a nearby bin. Yuuji can hear the tiny clinking sound it makes from here.

She's safe. She's *safe.* She hasn't been cursed. She *won't* be cursed. Now, even if everything else goes to hell, Fushiguro will never have to see his sister's body get overtaken by Yorozu. It won't happen. It will never happen.

As Tsumiki walks off in the golden afternoon light, Yuuji collapses onto a nearby park bench and prays he's done enough.

It's weird, how nothing and everything in Yuuji's life has changed.

Technically speaking, everything's the same. Yuuji's last year of middle school starts out exactly as he remembers. It's just—*Yuuji* has changed.

He has a lot of friends, but not very many *close* friends. He's got people he likes, people who like him, people he talks to, but...

But he realises, slowly, that he's lonely.

He didn't feel like this the first time he lived through middle school, but then again, the first time he lived through middle school he didn't know what he was missing. He'd been perfectly

content with his social life. But now, after knowing Fushiguro and Kugisaki—after carving up his heart for them, letting them both walk away with an equal piece—

Yuuji's *lonely.* He misses his friends—his *best* friends. He misses them so badly it aches. He wants to wake up to Kugisaki's stupid midnight rambling texts again. He wants to sling his arm over Fushiguro's shoulder and pull him in close. Hell, he even wants to get punched by Kugisaki for dropping her clothes, or hit over the head by Fushiguro for being a dumbass. Anything to have them back.

As the weeks go by, Yuuji finds himself hanging out with Ozawa more. He doesn't know why—he likes her, sure, but he's not entirely certain why he finds himself going out of his way to say hi to her in the halls. It's only when she invites him to go to a diner with some other friends that he realises: of all the people he knows in Sendai, Ozawa was the only one who ever met Fushiguro and Kugisaki.

Of course, she hasn't met them *yet.* Maybe she never will, since Kugisaki said that Ozawa only ever approached her because she recognised Yuuji. But that connection still exists to Yuuji, and he clings to it with both hands.

Ozawa's nice in her own right. She clams up a bit when there's too many people around, so they start hanging out one-on-one more. Yuuji enjoys her company—she's smart, and she's good at origami, and she likes to read philosophy books, which means that she's got really cool insights on basically everything to ever exist. She reminds him of Fushiguro in that way, which makes his chest hurt; she reminds him of Junpei in others, which is a whole *other* kind of hurt. Yuuji pushes the thought away. Ozawa's her own person, not just an echo of the other friends that Yuuji's lost; he focuses on *her,* on keeping the friendships that he has here and now.

It's Ozawa who ends up putting the idea in his head.

"I'm moving to Tokyo next year," she tells him over lunch one day. Yuuji blinks, looking up from his bento to stare at her. He—he *knew,* obviously, but for some reason, the news still makes him feel like he's losing another small piece of himself. Another friend gone.

"Seriously?" he asks. She nods. Yuuji looks back down at his bento and swallows around the sudden lump in his throat.

"Oh," he says. "That's—um. That's great for you, I guess. Tokyo's way cooler than here, right?"

It is. Yuuji knows that for a fact. He'd loved Tokyo, loved the bright districts and the way there were always people around, loved how he could go out at any hour of the night and still find something to do. Ozawa looks down at her own lap; she finished her lunch before Yuuji did, so now she's folding tiny paper flowers with scraps from her notebook.

"I don't want to go," she says quietly. "But my parents have to move for work, so...I don't really have a choice."

Yeah, Yuuji thinks, surprising himself with his own bitterness. *That seems like a common trend.*

(He pushes the memory of Fushiguro out of his head.)

He never would've considered it without Ozawa mentioning it. But—but, just one day after she tells him she's moving, the track and field coach corners Yuuji again in another attempt to get him to join the team. Yuuji tunes him out until he mentions scholarships for high school, and how, with Yuuji's natural talent, he could even end up going to Osaka or Tokyo, and—

And, for some stupid reason, it sticks in Yuuji's head.

Ozawa can move to Tokyo as a perfectly normal student, so why can't Yuuji? Tokyo's a big city. The chances of him running into Fushiguro or Kugisaki are slim. Besides, if he's in Tokyo for high school, then that means...

It means that he might be able to protect Fushiguro without being a sorcerer. It means that what happened at the detention centre that one time, when Yuuji felt Fushiguro die from three hundred kilometres away, will never have to happen again. If something happens in Tokyo and Fushiguro gets caught up in it, then Yuuji can intervene.

This time, when the coach offers Yuuji a scholarship application form, he takes it.

About halfway through their last year of middle school, Ozawa confesses to him.

It's an otherwise unremarkable day. They eat lunch together like they usually do, and Ozawa teases him for cutting his apples to look like rabbits. Right before class starts again, Ozawa says she has to go grab something, so Yuuji waits in the hallway outside her classroom as she digs through her bag. He's watching a small troop of ants work away at a piece of bread on the floor—he breaks it up a little with his shoe to make it easier for them—when Ozawa steps out of the classroom and clears her throat.

He looks up. "Did you get what you—"

His voice dies in his throat.

Ozawa's holding out a small bouquet of paper flowers, which Yuuji accepts out of instinct. She's bright red, and when she babbles her way through her confession, Yuuji's brain is basically blank with shock. He catches the end of it, though—"So, I like you, Itadori-kun," she finishes, her voice pitching higher with every word. "In that way, I mean. Would you want to go out sometime?"

Yuuji stares at her. In the distance, a bird chirps.

He wasn't expecting this.

He knew Ozawa liked him, obviously. He's known ever since that weird interaction in the diner in the original timeline. Kugisaki thinks he's stupid, but Yuuji saw the way Ozawa blushed. The only reason he ignored it was, well—by then, he had an execution date. Ozawa was a non-sorcerer. She didn't deserve to get caught up in that.

In this timeline, though, Yuuji will never eat Sukuna's finger. So in this timeline, if he wants to say yes to Ozawa, then he can.

He likes Ozawa. Really, he does. She's nice and pretty and she eats fish super neatly, which Yuuji thinks is one of the most impressive things in the world. She's a good friend, and she'd be a good girlfriend too, and Yuuji wouldn't mind going out with her. In the original timeline, if Ozawa had asked him out in middle school, he probably would've said yes. After all, there's no reason to say no.

But now, when Yuuji opens his mouth, he feels a twang of betrayal. Fushiguro's face flashes in his mind.

His mouth changes tack halfway through without his input. "I—I'm really sorry, Ozawa-chan," he says, and Ozawa's shoulders slump a little. "You're great, and I'm honoured, but...I already like someone else."

Huh?

As Ozawa stumbles through a hasty apology and Yuuji reassures her, there's something like panic at the back of his mind. When the bell rings and Ozawa goes off to class, her face bright red, Yuuji just stands in the hallway and stares at his shoes.

I already like someone else. The words had come so naturally. And...and when he said them...

He'd been thinking of Fushiguro. It was almost instinctive. The second Ozawa confessed, some part of Yuuji's brain had recoiled and said, *but what about Fushiguro?*

What *about* him? Yuuji and Fushiguro aren't like that. Yes, Yuuji loves him, would die for him, is endlessly devoted to him, but...

He crouches down on the ground and thinks. He's missing class, but that's fine. He needs a minute to figure this out.

Yuuji loves Fushiguro. This is a fact. He already knows that—sometimes it feels like his love is burned into him, branding him. It's an irreplaceable part of him. But he'd never stopped to think about what *kind* of love it was.

Platonic? Yes, of course—Fushiguro's his best friend. Familial? In a sense, also yes, but not because Yuuji thinks of Fushiguro as his brother or anything—it's really just because Yuuji considers him just as important as his family. Romantic? Yuuji doesn't know.

He pictures Fushiguro's face in his mind. He's stupidly pretty, of course. Yuuji's always thought he was the prettiest boy he's ever seen. Long lashes, bright eyes, a jaw that could cut

glass. But everyone thinks Fushiguro's pretty, right? Just because Yuuji finds him attractive, it doesn't have to mean that he's actually *attracted.*

He looks down at the small paper flower bouquet in his hands. He's not going to throw it out—Ozawa worked hard on it, after all—but, for a second, he imagines that it was Fushiguro who gave it to him. Fushiguro standing in front of him, eyes downcast, cheeks red. Fushiguro saying, *I like you, Itadori. In that way, I mean. Would you want to go out sometime?*

Suddenly, Yuuji feels his face heat. He presses the back of his hand to his cheek and finds it warm. There's an odd squirming feeling in his stomach—butterflies? Is he feeling butterflies?

If Fushiguro was the one who confessed to him, Yuuji would say yes. He'd take the paper bouquet into his hands, and he'd blush, and he'd work out a time and place for his and Fushiguro's first date. And then, maybe, if he was feeling especially brave, he'd lean in and press a kiss to Fushiguro's cheek, and—

Yuuji drops his head into his hands. Embarrassment makes his face flush hot. His stomach roils and churns with nerves.

Oh, he thinks, as his heart races in his chest. *So it's like that.*

Realising that he likes Fushiguro *like that* doesn't make much of a difference, in the long run. So sure, Yuuji kind of has a meltdown about it. Sure, he realises that he's actually liked Fushiguro *like that* for ages. Sure, he has a brief and terrible episode where he feels like he's going crazy, replaying every interaction he's ever had with Fushiguro through the lens of *does he like me back does he know I like him could we have been a thing if we had more time—*

Anyway. Not much of a difference. Really. The times when Yuuji kind-of-sort-of daydreams about him aren't that big of a deal. It doesn't matter that Yuuji has dreams where they're just sitting together in Jujutsu Tech, alive and happy, and Fushiguro's holding his hand. It doesn't matter that he adds extra ginger to his meatballs out of habit, even though he doesn't like it himself. It doesn't matter that he feels this awful, gaping hollow inside himself. It doesn't matter that he can't shake the feeling that he's missed his chance.

It doesn't matter. Yuuji's got other things to worry about. Namely, his decision to apply for a track and field scholarship in Tokyo.

"Tokyo?" His grandfather wrinkles his nose. "Why the hell would anyone want to go to Tokyo? We've got everything we need right here."

We, he says, because he doesn't know that he'll be dead by the time Yuuji finishes his first year of high school. Yuuji looks down at the scholarship application forms in his hands and smooths them out.

"I just have a feeling, I guess," he says, because saying that he's moving to Tokyo on the off-chance that Fushiguro will need him one day sounds absolutely insane. His grandfather scoffs, then devolves into a fit of coughs; Yuuji fetches him a glass of water and props him up to let him drink. His grandfather swats his hands away and drinks the water himself.

"A *feeling,* he says," his grandfather grumbles, eyeing Yuuji. "So you'll go off on your own then, I suppose."

"I'll come back a lot. It's only three hours by train."

"Three hours and twelve thousand yen."

"I'll get a job!"

"On top of your studies?"

"Loads of people do it," Yuuji tells him. "Ozawa-chan's moving to Tokyo too, you know."

His grandpa huffs, turning over in his bed. "So?" he says. "What do you have to do?"

"Well, Coach Goto's going to get me to join the track and field team for real." Yuuji adjusts the flowers he's brought today, making sure that they're getting enough sun. "It'll be a stretch 'cause I joined so late and I haven't been to any of their sports festivals or anything, but Coach Goto says that my times should be good enough that I've got a chance anyway."

"You'll get in," his grandfather says gruffly. Yuuji recognises it as his roundabout way of showing support, and his heart warms. The warmth abruptly dies at his grandpa's next words, though: "I suppose I should start preparing to die alone, then."

"Jii-chan!" Yuuji scolds. His grandpa snorts, even as Yuuji demands that he take it back.

In the end, Yuuji hears back from two of the schools he applies to. One of them is in Katsushika, in the east of Tokyo. The other is in Tachikawa, in the west. They both offer Yuuji a full-ride scholarship, complete with accommodation in the city, in exchange for his participation in their track and field team.

Jujutsu Tech is in the mountains to the west of Tokyo. Yuuji picks Tachikawa without hesitation.

He goes through the rest of his last year of middle school in a daze. While his classmates study to get into the better high schools around Sendai, Yuuji packs his things and irons the uniform that Tachikawa North High School #4 sends him. He takes down the posters in his room and wraps up the figurines he's collected over the years. He packs all his grandfather's old cassettes into a box, too, then brings them to the hospital so he can pick out the ones he wants Yuuji to have.

"Quit acting like I'm already dead, brat!" his grandfather snaps, but he carefully goes through the box anyway. They're all songs that his grandfather liked when he was younger, labelled with peeling tape. Yuuji had grown up listening to those cassettes and humming along to them as he watched his grandpa in the kitchen. Their cassette player broke down in his first

year of middle school, though, and he's never gotten around to buying another one, so the cassettes are basically useless now.

But still—it feels special when his grandfather picks out eight tapes and places them in Yuuji's hands.

So Yuuji packs them away, too. He resolves to find a cassette player once he's in Tokyo; he's sure he can pick one up in Akihabara. Slowly, he takes all the more sentimental things in the house: the finger portrait of him and his grandpa that he made when he was five. The stack of birthday cards in his dresser from friends over the years. The 'good' knife, an inexplicably sharp kitchen knife that his grandpa used to use for everything. A perfect rock that he found the first time he ever went to the beach. His grandpa's old scarf, faded yellow and slightly itchy. A photo of his grandfather holding him as a baby. And, finally, a copy of his parents' wedding portrait.

It's the only photo Yuuji has of them. As far as he can tell, his mother died soon after the wedding, and once Kenjaku took over, his grandfather refused to associate with her or Yuuji's father. He studies the photo now: his father, almost identical to Yuuji, sitting in a chair with his glasses tucked into his pocket. Next to him is his mother—or, at least, the woman who was supposed to be his mother.

She's smiling. Her forehead is untouched. It's a snapshot of a life that Yuuji never lived.

He folds the photo up and stuffs it at the bottom of all his things.

What's done is done. Yuuji can go all the way back to his birth if he wants to, but there's nothing he can do about his mother and Kenjaku—he can't fix something that happened before he was born. He's already done as much as he can to save Fushiguro while still staying out of his life. Hopefully, Fushiguro's living a happy life as a non-sorcerer somewhere, funded by Gojo and with Tsumiki by his side.

He wonders what Fushiguro will be if he's not a sorcerer. Will he go study philosophy or literature or something? He *did* like reading all those fancy non-fiction books. Or maybe he'll be a vet, since he likes animals so much. Or a doctor. He's definitely smart enough for it. Or maybe he'll go for something totally unexpected, like a manga author or a chef. The thought makes Yuuji laugh.

Maybe Yuuji will pass him on the street one day, and Fushiguro will be none the wiser. Maybe their eyes will meet for a second, and Fushiguro will just blink and move on while Yuuji stares after him.

He'll probably live the rest of his life always wondering where Fushiguro is and how he's doing. The thought of it hurts—of course it hurts—but, really, it's the best that Yuuji can hope for.

Yuuji tags along with Ozawa's family on their flight to Tokyo. Her parents are both sort of tired-looking, but they're nice enough; her baby sister is adorable, and Yuuji coos at her the whole time. Ozawa doesn't do well with planes, so Yuuji offers to let her squeeze his hand as they take off. When she lets go, her face is red, and Yuuji pretends he doesn't notice.

(If Fushiguro was the one squeezing his hand, Yuuji thinks he might've combusted.)

He parts ways with them outside the airport. "You're sure you'll be okay?" Ozawa's mother asks, hefting the baby on her hip. "You don't need someone to help you move everything in?"

Yuuji shakes his head. "No, I'll be fine," he tells them, and bows. "Thank you very much for helping me. Ozawa-chan, we'll meet up soon, okay?"

Ozawa nods. They wave at each other until Yuuji's taxi pulls away, and he finds himself back in the streets of Tokyo. He leans his head against the car window, a weird mix of emotions swelling in his chest: nostalgia, excitement, the old familiar ache at not having Fushiguro and Kugisaki here with him.

The apartment that the school's granted him is small. It's just a bedroom, a bathroom, and a living-room-slash-kitchen, but for a teenager living alone, that's more than enough. Yuuji tosses his things on the floor and falls asleep the second he gets his futon out.

Over the next week, he settles in. He doesn't have much to unpack, so it doesn't take long at all. He familiarises himself with the area around his apartment and introduces himself to the neighbours of his building: an elderly couple, a few university students, a young woman who works for a legal firm and is never home. He's the youngest occupant by far, and he's pretty sure all the old ladies have imprinted on him like a kitten or something, because they all check in on him countless times throughout the day to make sure he's doing fine. It's a little overbearing, but mostly sweet. Yuuji bakes them all a little cake as a thank you.

When the orientation for his new high school rolls around, the first thing Yuuji does is check for the school's resident cursed object. He eventually finds it hidden in the sports equipment shed—which is a *terrible* place, in Yuuji's opinion—in the form of something small and vaguely triangle-shaped. It's not until Yuuji sees the familiar tattoo markings that he realises it's a tongue—and not just a tongue, but the tongue of an Inumaki sorcerer. He swears and drops it immediately, before tucking it back into the tiny little crevice it was hidden in before.

The Inumaki tongue—*gross,* by the way, Yuuji shudders to think that he just touched the tongue of one of his senpai's ancestors—seems to be perfectly stable, so Yuuji leaves it for now. It's doing its job, at least; the rest of the school is devoid of curses, except for a few tiny fly-heads that ride in on the shoulders of the new first-years. Yuuji slips back into the crowd and gets to work on making friends.

The orientation is fine. Yuuji meets a few other boys his age, and they're all nice. He gets a few questions on whether or not his hair colour's real, which always makes him laugh. A week later, when the actual school term starts, Yuuji's feeling pretty good about it all.

He gets to school early on the first day. It's sunny, and Yuuji's always liked to look at the sky, so he picks a spot by the window and sits down. The other students in his class come

trickling in over the next few minutes. Yuuji spots one that he recognises from orientation, a tall lanky kid named Ikeda, and shares a grin and a wave with him from across the room.

Yeah, he's feeling good. He's back in Tokyo, where his friends are. He can keep an eye on things from a distance and intervene if he feels anything serious going down. He looks down at his desk, watching the sunlight fall across the little dents and scratches in it, and he has to bite back a smile.

He's so lost in thought that he doesn't realise someone's standing in front of him until they clear their throat. "Excuse me," they say. "Is this seat taken?"

Yuuji goes deadly still.

His mind whites out. For a long, long moment, there's nothing but static. He thinks a million thoughts. He thinks nothing. He thinks, *idiot.*

I'm such an idiot.

He didn't realise. He didn't *realise.* Somehow, he forgot—he forgot that only sorcerers attend Jujutsu Tech. Non-sorcerers go to normal high schools just like this one. And, thanks to Yuuji's intervention, in this timeline...

Slowly, Yuuji lifts his head.

Fushiguro Megumi stands in front of him. He's dressed in the uniform of Tachikawa North High School #4. He has a plain black bag slung over his shoulder. He looks down at Yuuji quizzically, without a hint of recognition on his face.

In this timeline, Fushiguro isn't a sorcerer.

In this timeline, Fushiguro goes to Yuuji's school.

In this timeline—

Yuuji clears his throat. "Uh, no, it's not taken," he says, glancing at the seat behind him, which Fushiguro is pointing at. "You can go ahead."

Fushiguro nods and goes to pull out the chair. Yuuji's eyes follow him helplessly, drawn to him like a magnet.

He needs to stay away. It won't be hard—if he doesn't draw Fushiguro's attention, then Fushiguro, antisocial little bastard that he is, won't seek Yuuji out. But—but—

But surely it can't hurt to introduce himself, right?

"I'm Itadori, by the way," he says, twisting around in his seat and sticking out his hand. "Itadori Yuuji."

Fushiguro stares at his hand for a moment. Then, tentatively, like it's an alien thing, he takes it. Yuuji feels sparks travel up his arm from where their skin touches.

"Fushiguro," he responds.

"Just Fushiguro?"

Fushiguro's brow twitches. "Fushiguro Megumi."

He looks like he's waiting for Yuuji to laugh, but Yuuji would never. He nods, flashing Fushiguro a smile.

"Cool," he says, just as the teacher walks in. As she calls for the class to quiet, Fushiguro blinks at him. "Nice to meet you, Fushiguro."

"Yeah," Fushiguro says back slowly, sounding thoughtful. "It's...nice to meet you too."

Chapter End Notes

- giggling and kicking my feet rn ohhh yuuji you have no idea what you're in for

- gojo and megumi's first meeting is a mix of anime subs, manga tl, and my own paraphrasing of the two to make it less formal-sounding in english. also, if that part was written in gojo's pov it would've been a million times longer because hoo boy he was THINKING. my glorious blue-eyed king you are both so unserious and so unsettling

- kaori's family name 'saito' is the same (very common) name as the non-sorcerer girl who goes to geto for help in jjk0.

- i'm sure that yuuji saving tsumiki will have no consequences whatsoever.

- i do headcanon yuuji as genuinely having small schoolboy crushes on ozawa and junpei! i think he gets crushes easily on people he finds admirable. however, megumi was the first time he's ever fallen in love.

- on 'tachikawa north high school #4': a Japanese superstition states that it's unlucky to sleep with your head facing north because it invites death. the number 4 is also unlucky because it sounds like the word for death. These are facts that could mean nothing :)

- like i said in the pre-chapter notes, this is part 1 of a 2-part chapter! Part 2/chapter 5 is an absolute monster (it will be the longest chapter of the fic by far), so I'm expecting it to take longer to write than all the others.

- chapter title from margaret atwood's poem 'corpse song':
"I exist in two places,
here and where you are."

Chapter 5: i fell in love—a mistake, of course

Chapter Notes

> happy early shibuya-incident-iversary! to celebrate, i present to you a whopping 24k words. like i said, this chapter is essentially an entire au by itself. hope y'all enjoy :D
>
> note: i aged tsumiki up by a year, so she's 2 years older than megumi and yuuji.
>
> (also, fun fact: i have now officially written 123k words for jjk in the 2 months since my first fic. insanity. i haven't been this possessed by a fandom since 2020.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As it turns out, there are two downsides of Yuuji realising that he's in love with his best friend: firstly, that it makes him act like an idiot. And secondly, *that it makes him act like an idiot.*

It's awful. Yuuji tries to avoid him, but his heart practically runs a marathon every time Fushiguro so much as glances in his direction. His one saving grace is the fact that Fushiguro's the kind of guy who doesn't talk to people unless they talk to him first. He's apparently left his delinquent days behind him, because he mostly just keeps to himself. After that first day, Yuuji is careful not to give Fushiguro too much attention, so Fushiguro doesn't pay him any in return.

Sure, they're classmates, and Fushiguro sits behind him, and one time Yuuji drops his pen and Fushiguro picks it up to hand it back to him and Yuuji feels like he's having a heart attack when their fingers brush, but—it's fine. It's so fine. Everything's just peachy.

Everything would be even peachier if Fushiguro's Divine Dogs would stop *staring* at him.

Even when Fushiguro's not a sorcerer, his Divine Dogs still exist. Yuuji's not sure what that says about Fushiguro. It might just be an inevitable part of his technique, or maybe he's just naturally this strong. Maybe this is what Gojo meant whenever he used to start yapping about Fushiguro's potential. In any case, Fushiguro keeps his Divine Dogs manifested most of the time, and it's slowly driving Yuuji insane.

The black one is more tame. It spends most of its time curled up at Fushiguro's feet, a quiet guardian that no one but Yuuji can see. It's the white dog that keeps causing issues—because, for some stupid reason, it keeps staring at Yuuji.

Like. *All the time.*

While the black dog dozes under Fushiguro's desk, the white one has a habit of ambling up the aisle to sit by Yuuji's chair. Then it just...stays there, staring at him with its huge yellow

eyes. Unblinking. Unmoving. It just *stares.* Yuuji tries to ignore it, but every time someone else gets up and unknowingly walks through the shikigami, he can't help but flinch. He avoids looking Fushiguro in the eyes too much, out of some irrational fear that the white dog's sniffed out his cursed energy or something, and Fushiguro will take one look at him and somehow just *know.*

"Dude," Ikeda, the tall boy from orientation, says to him one day. They're only a few weeks into the school year; Yuuji's gained a small gaggle of friends, Ikeda included, and he's already got a reputation for avoiding Fushiguro. "Are you, like, scared of him or something?"

"I'd be scared of him too, if he sat behind me," says another boy, Hirano. He's got a blond dye job so awful Yuuji knows Kugisaki would've gagged upon seeing him. "Does he even talk to anyone? I'm pretty sure all he does is glare."

"He's nice," Yuuji says automatically, feeling a flare of defensiveness. "And I'm not *scared* of him. I just..."

Think he's really, really pretty. Am in love with him. Need to stay away from him.

"...don't know how to talk to him," he finishes lamely. Ikeda and Hirano both raise their brows at him.

"You *want* to talk to him?" Hirano asks, like it's the most insane thing on earth. Yuuji bristles instinctively. Fushiguro's great, and these guys just don't know it. He's cool and smart and funny, in his own dry way, and Yuuji misses him so much he can feel it in his bones. Of course he wants to talk to Fushiguro. He'll always want to talk to Fushiguro.

But he can't say any of that without sounding like he's got a creepy obsession with the guy, so he just shrugs instead. "I wanna talk to everyone," he says, and he leaves it at that.

Apart from Fushiguro, Yuuji's life is running pretty smoothly so far. He makes friends, like Ikeda and Hirano. Joins the track and field team, like his scholarship dictated, and breaks the school's records on his second try—he's careful not to do it on the first, because that would've been a bit too conspicuous. He finds that Gojo was *incredibly* lacking in the academic part of their schooling, because he struggles a bit with his studies, even though this is technically his second time going through high school. He pulls through in the end, though, and by the time his first big exam comes around, he's managed to wrangle passing grades in all his subjects.

...Well. All except for one.

"I'm afraid you're failing Science, Itadori-kun," Sasakawa says, peering down at Yuuji over his wire glasses. Sasakawa is a thin old man who looks like he'd fall over with the slightest breeze, and he's apparently the guy in charge of overseeing Yuuji's scholarship. Yuuji doesn't like him. He looks like a tortoise and he acts like one too: slow and perpetually grumpy. And he eats a lot of salad. "As one of the requirements of your scholarship is a passing grade in all of your required classes, you understand why this is a problem."

"Yes, Sasakawa-sensei," Yuuji mumbles, shoving his hands under his thighs to occupy them.

"Your teachers tell me that you struggle mostly with the physics component. We'll need to get your grade up as soon as possible."

"Yes, Sasakawa-sensei."

Sasakawa nods firmly. "Good to know that we're on the same page, Itadori-kun." Then he reaches into his binder—in the short time Yuuji has spent at this school, he's already discovered that Sasakawa *loves* office binders—and pulls out a paper, sliding it towards Yuuji.

Tutor Request Form, it reads.

"We'll match you up with a third-year tutor," Sasakawa says, adjusting his glasses. Yuuji winces and slides a bit further down into his chair. "There are a few students who volunteer for the school's peer tutoring program, including some who are top of their year in physics. I'm sure that one of them will be able to get you back on track."

So Yuuji has to get tutored for physics. It's embarrassing, but in an abstract sort of way—Yuuji has faced things much worse than finding a bunch of imaginary math equations hard. His first session is at the end of April; Yuuji waits in the back of the library for his tutor, bouncing his leg absently. He hopes they're nice.

Someone rounds the nearest bookshelf. Yuuji hastily sits up straight.

"Itadori Yuuji-kun?"

Oh.

Oh, *no.*

Fushiguro Tsumiki stands by the bookshelf, her school satchel in hand. She blinks at Yuuji for a moment, then brightens.

"Oh!" she says, snapping her fingers. "I remember you! You're that boy from the park last year!"

The universe hates him.

That's the only explanation. The universe hates him. Seriously, it *hates* him. First Fushiguro is in his class, and now this? As Tsumiki sets her satchel down and introduces herself, Yuuji's head is full of static.

This—this doesn't have to be a big deal. Right? Tsumiki's just his tutor. That doesn't mean that Yuuji has to actually get to know her. It *definitely* doesn't mean that Yuuji will have to get to know Fushiguro. This is fine. It's *fine.* Everything is *so fine.*

It's a miracle that he manages to get through that first lesson without exploding from tension. He feels like he's got a constant current of electricity running under his skin, telling him to go, to move, to *do* something. He keeps tapping his pen against the table and bouncing his knee. Tsumiki, bless her, takes his restlessness in stride. She asks him to write down the

sections of the textbook he doesn't understand, then pulls out the rubric for the rest of the term so that Yuuji knows what topics to expect. She has snacks, too, those soft grape-flavoured jelly sweets from the konbini, as well as a pack of ginger candies that she carefully sets aside.

Each tutoring session is scheduled for an hour, so, when the clock ticks over, Tsumiki wraps things up. She even adds Yuuji on LINE so that he can text her any questions he has before their next session. She really is a good tutor; it makes Yuuji feel bad for being so distracted, like he's wasting her talents somehow.

He shoves his notebook back into his bag quickly. It's best if he gets out of here fast, so that he and Tsumiki don't get the chance to make small talk. He thanks her quickly, then rushes out of the library—

He promptly trips over a familiar white dog.

He's power-walking fast enough that he can't stop himself from falling. With a yelp, he topples forward, the concrete rushing up to meet him—or it *would,* if it wasn't for someone else hastily catching him under the arms.

"What the—Itadori?"

Yuuji looks up and immediately forgets how to breathe.

Fushiguro is—he's *right* there. His face is so close to Yuuji's own, and *wow.* What a face it is. Like, yeah, Yuuji knew he was pretty, but this is just unfair.

How has he never noticed how green Fushiguro's eyes are? Like—they're dark, dark enough to just look like brown eyes from a distance, but up close they're like emeralds, or spring leaves, or seaglass, or whatever the hell else people call pretty green things. Yuuji could stare at them for days. Hell, he could stare at them for the rest of his life. He opens his mouth, dazed, ready to tell Fushiguro that he—

"Ah, Megumi!" Tsumiki chirps, coming out of the library behind Yuuji. "Your club's finished already?"

"I left early." Megumi heaves Yuuji back upright and sets him on his feet. Yuuji wavers for a second, his brain still caught in a daze of *pretty* and *green* and *love,* until something wet touches the back of his hand and he gets snapped back into reality. He glances down and finds the white dog nosing at his knuckles, looking up at him curiously; in the background, Tsumiki chides Fushiguro for leaving his club early. Yuuji barely pays their conversation any mind. He's too busy panicking.

Holy shit. Holy *shit.* Just then, he'd been about to say—okay, so he doesn't actually know what he was about to say. But he knows it was stupid. He knows it would've been the single most embarrassing thing he ever could've come up with. What the hell, Yuuji?

"—it's rude," Tsumiki is saying, frowning. Fushiguro makes a 'tch' sound with his mouth. "Don't give me that, Megumi. You shouldn't leave your club early just to finish at the same

time as me. I can wait for you, you know?"

"Can we talk about this later?" Fushiguro asks pointedly, his eyes flicking to Yuuji. Tsumiki blinks, then turns around.

"Oh—I'm so sorry," she says, giving Yuuji a sheepish grin. "Itadori-kun, this is my brother, Megumi. Megumi, this is Itadori Yuuji-kun."

"We've met," Fushiguro says shortly.

"Yeah, we're in the same class," Yuuji adds weakly. Fushiguro's gaze snaps towards him again, oddly intense, and Yuuji has to look back down at his feet before he spontaneously combusts. The white Divine Dog is still staring at him, like it always does. Yuuji inches away from it nervously.

Tsumiki beams. "Oh, you're classmates? That's nice. Megumi, you should talk to Itadori-kun more—he's a nice boy."

Yuuji feels his face heat up. He splutters out something unintelligible, but Fushiguro just rolls his eyes and mutters something that Yuuji doesn't catch. Tsumiki lets out a chuckle, then steps forward and steers Fushiguro away.

"Well, we'll be heading home now," she tells Yuuji. The white dog finally peels away from him and follows her docilely, though, of course, Tsumiki is entirely oblivious. "Get home safe, okay, Itadori-kun? I'll see you on Friday!"

"Uh, yeah," Yuuji says, raising a hand. "You too, Fushiguro-senpai."

He waves at them until they turn the corner and disappear out of sight. Then he presses a hand to his chest. For a moment, he just stands there, feeling the frantic *ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum* of his own heartbeat. His face still feels flushed. He can't stop thinking about Fushiguro's eyes, about the curve of his lashes, about how steady his hands had been as he stopped Yuuji from falling.

Oh, man. He's in trouble.

So this is how it goes.

Twice a week, Yuuji and Tsumiki meet after school. Tuesdays and Fridays, usually. They sit at the back of the library, and Tsumiki will have snacks—after the first couple of sessions, she asks Yuuji what he likes and starts bringing those. They'll go through what problems Yuuji couldn't do, or what topics he's having trouble with. It's a great set-up, honestly. Tsumiki's the best tutor he could ask for. There's just one problem:

Twice a week, Yuuji meets with Tsumiki. And twice a week, like clockwork, Fushiguro will be there.

He's in the chess club, apparently. Yuuji suspects that he only does it because the school makes it compulsory to join a club. He also suspects that Fushiguro only ever plays one game before leaving, because he's *always* waiting outside the library by the time they finish. Actually, at some point, he just ends up coming into the library right before the clock hits the hour, and he sits there in the corner with his white dog staring at Yuuji, as usual. It makes Yuuji's palms sweat and his stomach churn with nerves. Fushiguro doesn't really do much—he'll wander around the library, then come back with a book to pick through while he waits for Yuuji and Tsumiki to finish—but still.

At this point, Yuuji feels like he's been trained to always be aware of where Fushiguro is. Even if he's just sitting in the corner, nose buried in a book to give Yuuji some privacy, Yuuji still feels his presence the same way he'd feel the heat from a bonfire.

It doesn't help that Tsumiki seems hellbent on making them interact. She'll ask Yuuji about his teachers, then rope Fushiguro into the conversation for a sentence or two. She'll tease Fushiguro about his book choices and share conspiratorial glances with Yuuji. Yuuji makes more eye contact with Fushiguro in these one-hour sessions than he does for the entirety of the rest of the school day.

Then, sometime around their fourth week, Tsumiki's phone buzzes on the table. She peers at the screen, then pauses halfway through her explanation.

Yuuji glances at her. "Is everything okay?"

"Hm? Oh, yes, it's just..." Tsumiki looks at her phone, then at Fushiguro, then back at her phone. She clears her throat. "I just, ah...I should really take that call, but I think we need to get through this last question before our session finishes." She taps her pen against the table. "Actually, Megumi, could you take over?"

Yuuji chokes on nothing. At the same time, Fushiguro's head snaps up. He makes an odd little 'hrk' sound in the back of his throat. "What?"

Tsumiki looks up at him. "I've taught you this before, so you should be fine," she says, already sliding out of her seat. "Itadori-kun, you don't mind if Megumi helps you for this last one, do you?"

"Huh?" Yuuji stares at her. "I mean...no?"

Tsumiki beams. "Wonderful! I'll leave you two to it, then."

And then she just—leaves. Just like that. She takes out her phone and holds it up as she walks off; Fushiguro's white dog immediately gets to its feet and follows. Yuuji and Fushiguro both stare after her, eyes wide. For a second, there's total silence.

Then Fushiguro sighs and closes his book with a snap. "Let's get this over with, then," he says, and Yuuji's brain goes through a five-stage meltdown as Fushiguro comes over to sit

down next to him. "Which question was it?"

"Uh." Yuuji's mouth is dry. His head is spinning. Fushiguro's done nothing but *sit next to him,* and yet Yuuji's reacting like he got punched in the head. "Um, this one. Here."

He taps it with the end of his pen. Fushiguro squints down at it, then clicks his tongue.

"Alright," he says, reaching out to pull Yuuji's notebook towards him. Their elbows brush on the table, and Yuuji feels like a blade of dry grass being held to a fire. "What are you having trouble with?"

Fushiguro's a surprisingly good teacher. His voice is low and calm, and he's good at laying things out step by step. It's too bad that Yuuji's brain is so scrambled by his presence that everything he says just goes in one ear and out the other.

By the time the clock hits the hour, Tsumiki still hasn't returned. Yuuji thanks Fushiguro and starts packing up. He's about to slide his notebook back into his bag when Fushiguro speaks.

"Itadori, wait."

"Hm?" Yuuji looks up. "Everything okay?"

Fushiguro's brow is furrowed. He looks at Yuuji for a moment, as if thinking, before he lets out a sharp exhale.

"You're a sorcerer," he says, his eyes boring into Yuuji's. "Right?"

The notebook slips out of Yuuji's hands and falls to the floor with a thud. He can't bring himself to care.

A thousand responses run through his mind. Does he admit it? Does he deny it? He can't tell which would be the better option. Would Fushiguro hate him for being a sorcerer, or would he be relieved to meet someone else who can see curses? Yuuji doesn't know. He *doesn't know.*

So, in the end, he goes for the dumbest option: "Sorry, what?"

"You're a sorcerer," Fushiguro repeats, his voice low. "You have cursed energy. You can see my shikigami, and you can touch them too. You tripped over Shiro on your first day with Tsumiki."

"Shikigami?" Yuuji forces a laugh. "Uh, Fushiguro, I don't really know what you're—"

Fushiguro narrows his eyes. His hands shift into a familiar sign. Between one breath and the next, his black dog materialises from the shadows beneath their feet. Yuuji glances down at it instinctively, and Fushiguro jabs a finger at him.

"There. You looked. You see him, don't you?"

The black dog barks. Yuuji jumps at the sound. That seems to be enough evidence for Fushiguro, who leans back in his seat.

"So?" he asks curtly. "What's a sorcerer doing here?"

"I'm not...ugh." Yuuji groans, dragging a hand down his face. "I'm not a sorcerer, okay? I can see curses and stuff, but...I'm not."

"You're not?" Fushiguro asks suspiciously.

"No." *I can't be,* Yuuji adds quietly in his head. Venturing too far near sorcery will risk the entire Sukuna debacle happening again. "Aren't you the same? You've even got shikigami."

He gestures at the black dog, which is circling protectively around its master's feet. The dog growls at him, but Fushiguro puts a hand on its head, and it quiets.

"Shiro and Kuro come with my technique," he says. Yuuji blinks a little at that. *Shiro and Kuro*—it's obvious which is which, but he's surprised that Fushiguro's named them. As far as Yuuji knows, the Divine Dogs went unnamed in every other timeline. "They would've shown up sooner or later." Fushiguro looks down, scratching at Kuro's neck; the dog pushes up into the touch, pleased. "They're not really shikigami. They're more like pets."

Yuuji can't help it—he snorts. Oh man. If only the Fushiguro he knew could hear this. He'd always been so adamant that his Divine Dogs weren't pets, that they shouldn't be fed treats, that they were big bad curse-killing machines...and yet here he is in another universe, naming them Shiro and Kuro and making them hang out with him at school.

Fushiguro glares at him. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing, nothing." Yuuji waves a hand. "Anyway, uh, since you know I can see your dogs and all...can I ask you a question?"

"Only if I can ask you a question first."

"You already asked me a question!"

"That doesn't count," Fushiguro snaps. "Can I ask or not?"

"You're so unfair," Yuuji whines, but he feels like there's a helium balloon in his chest, light and growing lighter. He's getting dangerously close to acting with Fushiguro the same way he used to, back in the original timeline. "Alright, fine. Shoot."

Fushiguro glances towards the library door, then leans in. "Last year, when you helped Tsumiki," he begins, and Yuuji raises his brows. He didn't realise it was a big enough deal for Tsumiki to tell Fushiguro about it. "She came home with cursed energy on her. Was that you?"

Yuuji's heart drops right into the pit of his stomach.

"Huh?" He reaches out and grabs Fushiguro's shoulders, hard. Kuro huffs, but doesn't intervene. "She had cursed energy on her? Is she okay? Have you noticed—"

"She's *fine."* Fushiguro pries Yuuji's hands off of him. "So it wasn't you?"

"Duh," Yuuji says. Fushiguro's eye twitches. "What do you mean, she came home with cursed energy?"

Fushiguro scowls. "It was on her hand," he says. "I could feel it. It went away after a bit, but our guardian freaked out about it when I told him. That's why we moved here, to Tachikawa." He fixes Yuuji with a look. "If it wasn't you, then do you know who it was?"

Yuuji's head is spinning. It's a lot of information all at once. Their guardian—that must be Gojo. He probably suspected someone was targeting Tsumiki; Yuuji's glad he moved them away from Saitama. As for the cursed energy...

On Tsumiki's hand. Yuuji thinks back to that day and remembers: when Tsumiki took the tooth from Kenjaku, there had been the tiniest spark of cursed energy. But—but it wasn't enough to do any damage, was it? Tsumiki never ate the tooth. And she's still uncursed even now, more than a year later, so...

So maybe she really *is* fine. Maybe Kenjaku's plan really did fail.

"I mean, there was this lady with stitches on her head," Yuuji says slowly. Fushiguro's watching him intently, one hand carding through Kuro's fur. "She was definitely a sorcerer. She gave Fushiguro-senpai a cursed object, but I told her not to eat it. It was probably her."

Fushiguro's face gets darker and darker the more Yuuji talks. "A sorcerer with stitches on her head, huh?" he mutters, pulling out his phone and typing something down. "...Alright. Thanks, Itadori."

"Yeah, sure." Yuuji leans down to finally pick up his fallen notebook. "Can I ask my question now?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah. What is it?"

"Nothing big." Yuuji shoves his notebook in his bag and zips it up. "Just wanted to ask why your white dog—uh, Shiro?—keeps staring at me all the time. He's kind of weirding me out."

To his surprise, Fushiguro's face flushes. It's just the tiniest bit, a faint splotchy pink along the tops of his cheekbones, but Yuuji's memorized his face by now, so he sees it right away.

"No reason," Fushiguro says, too quickly. "You just...reminded me of someone else."

He turns around and rushes out before Yuuji can ask him anything else. Yuuji watches, bewildered, as Fushiguro walks to the door where Tsumiki is, grabbing her elbow and tugging her forward to walk with him. Tsumiki says something to him, and Fushiguro's shoulders hunch up as he responds.

As the siblings walk away, Tsumiki looks back and throws Yuuji a thumbs-up behind Fushiguro's back. Yuuji returns it, just because it seems like the kind of thing he should do.

Jeez. He's never been more confused in his life.

After that incident in the library, something shifts.

Fushiguro says hi to him now. In the mornings, when he walks into the room, he gives Yuuji a little nod and a *hi, Itadori.* Yuuji, helpless idiot in love that he is, always says hi back. It makes him feel a little giddy, honestly—the fact that *he's* the only one who Fushiguro goes out of his way to acknowledge. Also, Kuro's started hanging around Yuuji now. Shiro's stopped his staring, returning to Fushiguro's side, but now Kuro seems to have decided that Yuuji's a friend, because he curls up at Yuuji's feet just like he does to Fushiguro. In Yuuji's opinion, it's the cutest thing in the world.

Yuuji ends up talking more with Fushiguro after his sessions with Tsumiki, too. Yuuji pokes Fushiguro about the books he reads, and Fushiguro, in return, asks if Yuuji got fed steroids as a baby. Apparently Yuuji's something of a celebrity in their year because he broke all the school's sports records. Yuuji had no idea. Fushiguro rolls his eyes at him and calls him 'unfathomably dense', which is so *Fushiguro* of him that Yuuji bursts out laughing.

He talks with Tsumiki, too, the three of them lingering in the library even after Yuuji's tutoring sessions wrap up. Yuuji tells them he's from Sendai; Tsumiki asks if he's ever lived in Saitama, with a weird pointed glint in her eye, but Yuuji shakes his head no. He tells them about his grandpa and what a grouch he is. Fushiguro says he'd rather a grouch than a clown. The clown in question, Yuuji supposes, is Gojo.

It's nice. Yuuji's missed Fushiguro. In every way possible, he's missed him. To be able to just sit here, day after day, talking and laughing with him...Yuuji can barely believe it.

It's getting harder and harder to remember why he needs to stay away.

When he first decided to avoid Fushiguro, it was because he didn't want Fushiguro caring about him. He didn't want Fushiguro to throw himself headfirst into danger again, like he did with Sukuna's finger. Like he did after Shibuya. But—but Fushiguro's not a sorcerer now, and Yuuji's not Sukuna's vessel. Gojo will probably be the one sent to retrieve the finger in Sendai, since Kugisaki didn't arrive at the school until afterwards. Technically speaking, there's nothing Yuuji can do to hurt Fushiguro.

...Right?

A few weeks into this newfound friendship, their teacher announces a project. A history presentation, to be done in pairs. Yuuji feels Kuro nudge his nose against his knee almost

immediately. He looks down. The dog is staring up at him, plaintive; Yuuji looks over his shoulder.

Fushiguro's already looking at him. He meets Yuuji's eyes and tilts his head to the side, a silent question. *Partners?*

Yuuji shouldn't. Really, he shouldn't.

Fushiguro raises his brows. The light from the window is slanting off his hair just so.

Yuuji shouldn't—but he does.

He gives in to the terrible awful ache in his chest, to the part of him that's been carefully tuned to Fushiguro's frequency. He gives in to the metaphorical knife that sits between his ribs: wounding him, but holding the blood in at the same time.

Yuuji looks at Fushiguro and nods. *Partners.*

Fushiguro's mouth curls up in that little half-smile. And, for one beautiful moment, Yuuji looks at that smile and forgets that anything could ever go wrong.

In June, Yuuji goes back to Sendai.

He's been calling the hospital every other day to check in with his grandpa, but since his grandpa doesn't have a mobile, video calls are impossible. Yuuji's missed him badly. Once June rolls around, and Yuuji knows that his grandpa could pass at any moment, he takes the train back home. He tells the school it's a family emergency.

He lets Fushiguro know that he won't be at school for the rest of the week. Just a quick message—*hey, won't be at school for a bit, but text me if u need to talk about the presentation.* He knows Fushiguro is a serially bad texter, so he's expecting nothing more than a thumbs-up emoji. He's surprised when, just half an hour after he sends the text, he gets a full sentence back.

Fushiguro Megumi: *Okay. Thanks for letting me know.*

Fushiguro Megumi: *Is everything okay?*

Something squeezes in Yuuji's chest. This—*this* is how he knows that Fushiguro's actually starting to care about him. They've been hanging out more and more lately, for their project but also just for fun, and Yuuji doesn't go a day without texting Fushiguro at least once.

Itadori Yuuji: *yeah just had to go back to sendai for a bit lol*

Itadori Yuuji: *family stuff*

Fushiguro Megumi: *Okay. Hope everything's well.*

Yuuji swallows. Everything's definitely not well, but he's not telling Fushiguro that.

He buys his grandpa flowers, obviously. And his grandpa yells at him when he sees them, also obviously. But when Yuuji leans down to hug him, his grandfather's arms are stronger than they've been in months, a vice grip around Yuuji's torso.

"Look at you, living in the city all on your own," his grandfather grumbles. He says it like it's an insult, but from the way the nurses had greeted Yuuji, Yuuji knows he must've bragged about it at least a little. He can imagine how that went: *my grandson, Yuuji, that brat—went off and got a full-ride scholarship in Tokyo, can you believe it? Hmph. Kids these days.*

"Well?" his grandfather asks. "Anything new? You're young, you ought to be living to the fullest. Met a girl yet? Gotten a job?"

"Jii-chan," Yuuji hisses, his face inadvertently flushing as Fushiguro's face automatically pops into his head. He has to physically shake it off like a dog shaking water out of their ears. "That's not important. I'm here to visit you."

"'Not important', my ass," his grandfather mutters, but he lets it slide. Yuuji keeps his curiosity satisfied with a few mundane stories. He talks about the track and field team, about Ikeda and Hirano and the other friends he's made. He mentions Fushiguro in passing—but, to his embarrassment, his grandpa latches onto that information like a fish on a hook.

"Stop." His grandpa jabs a gnarled finger at him. "Stop talking."

"Hm?"

His grandpa squints at him. "You're *red."*

Yuuji swallows. "Am I?" Even to his own ears, his voice sounds suspiciously strained. "Well, maybe I should open a window. It's probably too hot in here, that can't be good for a hospital —"

His grandpa's hand shoots out and wraps around his wrist before he can make his escape. "Sit *down,* Yuuji," he says, narrowing his eyes. "Tell me more about that Fushiguro boy."

"Fushiguro?" Yuuji's voice comes out as a squeak. "He just sits behind me in class. I don't really know him that well or—"

"Bullshit."

"Jii-chan!"

"Bullshit," his grandfather insists. "You're sweet on him, aren't you? Fushiguro?"

He's got that knowing look in his eye, so Yuuji gives up. He flops forward onto the bed and buries his face in his hands. "Is it that obvious?"

His grandfather snorts. "Like a dog in a university class."

Yuuji groans. It's horrifically embarrassing that his *grandpa* managed to find out his crush just based on how he looked when he mentioned Fushiguro's name. When he peeks up through his fingers, he finds his grandpa watching him with a wry smile.

"Well, would you look at that," his grandfather says, leaning back. "At least I got to see my grandson in love before I die."

"Don't say things like that, Jii-chan," Yuuji scolds. His grandfather just snorts out a laugh and rolls over.

Yuuji's week in Sendai passes calmly. He sends Fushiguro pictures of stray cats, and Tsumiki pictures of clouds, because she's said before that she likes them. He meets up with old friends, cleans out his house. He spends most of his time in the hospital, playing board games with his grandpa or arguing over mundane things.

Two days before Yuuji returns to Tokyo, his grandfather passes away.

It's the same as every other time, but it never gets any easier. The grief still chokes him, still finds a way to worm itself into his ribs. There's the death, the documentation, the cremation. No wake or funeral, because Yuuji's the only person who'd attend anyway. He buries his grandpa in the family grave, like he always has, and gives him a quick prayer before he departs.

He'll be okay eventually, but for now, he lets it hurt.

He's not sure why he does it. From Fushiguro's perspective, they're nowhere near close enough for Yuuji to be sharing this kind of thing. But—but, somehow, even though Yuuji was determined to not let things get this far...

Somehow, Fushiguro's slowly becoming his closest friend again. So Yuuji sends him a message.

Itadori Yuuji: *my grandpa passed away*

Fushiguro Megumi is typing...

Fushiguro Megumi: *I'm sorry.*

Itadori Yuuji: *its ok*

Itadori Yuuji: *sorry i shouldnt have just dumped it on u like that*

Fushiguro Megumi: *I don't mind.*

There's a lull in the conversation after that. Yuuji doesn't take offence. After all, what do you say when your sort-of friend tells you their only family just died?

Fushiguro's typing bubble appears and disappears on the screen a couple times. Yuuji watches it phase in and out of view before Fushiguro finally sends a message back.

Fushiguro Megumi: *What's your address?*

Fushiguro Megumi: *In Tokyo, I mean.*

Fushiguro Megumi: *Tsumiki and I want to send you something.*

Send him something? Sure, why not. Yuuji shrugs and texts his address over. Fushiguro goes silent after that, and Yuuji doesn't initiate a conversation again.

It's dark by the time he gets back to Tokyo. He catches a taxi back to his apartment building, only to pause when he finds a note attached to the door. It's from the old couple who live on the ground floor, telling him that a package came for him and they left it outside his door.

A package? Fushiguro, probably, since no one else knows where he lives. Yuuji climbs the stairs with a faint curiosity.

He finds a basket outside his door. Like—an actual basket, with a handle and everything. The first thing he sees is the note, taped to the handle and written in neat, slanted handwriting:

Sorry for your loss. Hope this will make things a bit better. Text or call if you need to.

- Fushiguro (both of us)

Yuuji peers inside the basket. It's nothing crazy—the snacks he's mentioned liking during his sessions with Tsumiki, a box of calming tea blends, a small dog plushie, a blank journal and pen, and a DVD copy of some horror movie Yuuji's never even heard of. He's willing to bet that that last one is Fushiguro's doing, since Yuuji once told him he liked horror. There's a few groceries thrown in there too, fruits and rice noodles and the like. Yuuji's eyes start to burn.

He pulls out his phone and scrolls to Fushiguro's LINE contact.

Itadori Yuuji: *thanks for the basket*

Itadori Yuuji: *like, really*

This time, Fushiguro really does respond with just a thumbs-up emoji. Yuuji can't help but let

out a watery laugh.

Yeah. He thinks he'll be okay.

In July, a round of summer storms sweeps through Tokyo. The skies turn grey and heavy, and the air is always humid. It makes Yuuji's uniform shirt stick to his skin unpleasantly. When he and Fushiguro stay back after school to work on their project in the library, he spends at least sixty percent of his time complaining about the library's broken air conditioner.

After Yuuji's two-hundredth complaint, Fushiguro slams his laptop shut. "Alright, *fine,"* he says, glaring at Yuuji with no real heat behind his eyes. "If we go to my place instead, will you finally stop complaining?"

Yuuji peels himself off the table. Like, literally peels—his skin sticks to it. It's gross. "Your place?" he asks, something like butterflies fluttering in his stomach.

Fushiguro's already packing up. "My apartment's only a ten minute walk from the school," he says. "And we've got a working air conditioner. If it gets you to shut up, then I don't care."

"I didn't mean to—"

Fushiguro waves him off. It seems like he's already set on going back to his apartment—Yuuji suspects that he was looking for a reason to escape the stuffy library too. So they pack up their things and make to head out.

It's raining outside. Not too heavily, but enough that an umbrella's definitely needed; it's been like this, on and off, all week. Yuuji rummages around in his bag for his umbrella. Fushiguro's lagging behind, apparently double-checking to make sure they didn't leave anything in the library, so Yuuji's the first one who sees the girl.

She's a student, obviously. Maybe around Tsumiki's age. She's standing a few paces away from the door, looking out at the rain and worrying her lip between her teeth. In her arms, she's holding a canvas—ah. An art student. Yuuji looks at the rain, then at the girl's anxious face, and the pieces click together.

He walks up to her. "Hey," he says, and the girl startles a little. "Do you not have an umbrella?"

The girl shakes her head. "No, I forgot," she says miserably. Distantly, Yuuji hears the groaning of the door as Fushiguro steps out of the library. "I have to catch the bus, but it's a fifteen minute walk, and..." She gestures hopelessly at the rain. "And I have to walk home after that, too."

Yuuji looks at her canvas, at the way she folds herself over it protectively, and...well. Honestly, it's not even a choice.

"You can take mine," he says, holding out his umbrella. The girl stares at him.

"I—no, I couldn't," she splutters. "What about you? I can't make you walk in the rain."

Yuuji flashes her a grin. "Nah, don't worry about it," he says. "It's my extra. I've got another one in my bag."

He doesn't have another umbrella, but the girl doesn't need to know that. She takes the umbrella with a grateful smile, offering Yuuji a hasty thank-you and asking for his name and class number so that she can return it to him tomorrow. Yuuji waves her off, then watches as she darts out just in time to catch her bus.

For a few seconds, all he can hear is the rain on the roof. Then Fushiguro, who's been standing behind him silently this whole time, clears his throat.

"*You* carry an extra umbrella?" he asks skeptically. "No offence, but you don't seem like the type."

Yuuji laughs. "Ah, no," he says, glancing back to find Fushiguro pulling his own umbrella out of his bag. "That was just so she wouldn't feel bad about it." He steps forward, holding a hand out to test the rain. It's not too bad—he'll get soaked, sure, but it's just a little water. He'll just shake himself off like a dog before he goes into Fushiguro's apartment.

Fushiguro makes an odd noise. "You gave her your only umbrella?"

Yuuji shrugs, looking back at him over his shoulder. "It's okay," he says, offering a smile. "My immune system's super strong, I won't get sick or anything."

For a moment, Fushiguro just stares at him. There's an expression on his face that nags at some old corner of Yuuji's brain, like he's seen it before. But then he blinks, and the look is gone. Fushiguro looks down at the ground and sighs.

"Don't be an idiot," he says, moving to stand next to Yuuji. He opens up his umbrella, then shifts his hand so that it covers the both of them. "We'll just share mine."

Share—?

Yuuji flushes hot all over, and it's got nothing to do with the humidity. "Fushiguro, you don't have to—"

"Shut up," Fushiguro snaps. "You think I'm enough of an asshole to make you walk in the rain right next to me? Come on."

He steps out into the rain, nudging Yuuji along with him, and Yuuji stumbles out after him. The rain drums on the umbrella, a steady background hum. Yuuji tries to avoid bumping into Fushiguro, but they're two people under a one-person umbrella; it's impossible to keep from brushing arms. Every time their elbows touch, Yuuji feels it like a fire.

"Why are you—stop walking like that," Fushiguro says, as Yuuji wobbles sideways for the millionth time. He reaches out and hooks a hand around Yuuji's elbow, tugging him in closer. "You're walking like a drunk. Just stay under the umbrella."

"Okay," Yuuji croaks out, his brain too frazzled by Fushiguro's hand (!) on his arm (!!) to say anything else. Fushiguro gives him a weird look, but he doesn't say anything about it. Yuuji focuses on avoiding puddles and pulling Fushiguro away from the curb whenever a car passes.

As expected, Fushiguro's apartment is in the slightly swankier part of town. His building's the kind that has a shared balcony that everyone's front door opens out onto, so Fushiguro passes Yuuji the umbrella to shield them from the rain as he opens the door. Yuuji swallows.

He's never been to Fushiguro's apartment before. Not in the first timeline, or any timeline after. This—this is something new.

Fushiguro looks back over his shoulder. "Oi. Are you coming or not?"

"Jeez, give a guy some time to take off his shoes," Yuuji says, to cover up the fact that his heart's fluttering in his chest. He shakes off the umbrella as best he can, then follows Fushiguro in.

Fushiguro's apartment is decently big for two teenagers living in Tokyo. The hallway opens up into the living room, which has a couch and a low table; the kitchen is connected to the living room, big enough to have a small island in the middle. There's another hallway that splits off, presumably leading to the bedrooms and bathroom. Yuuji looks around and sees a few photos hanging on the wall, mostly of the Fushiguro siblings at school events. There's a shelf up against one wall that has a few haphazard, mismatched trinkets on it—that reeks of Gojo.

Fushiguro leads Yuuji to his room. He stops at Tsumiki's door to tell her that Yuuji's here; Tsumiki beams at him and tells him to make himself at home.

When Yuuji steps into Fushiguro's room, he's expecting something like his dorm room back at Jujutsu Tech: clean, practical, with very few personal things on display. And, for the most part, that's what he gets. Fushiguro has a bed, a desk, a small bookshelf, and that's about it—but there's one more thing that Yuuji had never seen before in his days at Jujutsu Tech.

He can't help the grin that spreads across his face. "Who's that?"

Fushiguro looks over and flushes, lunging across his bed to snatch up the worn dog plushie. It's a faded grey, clearly well-loved, with one of its ears slightly ragged at the edges. "Shut up," Fushiguro snaps, stuffing it behind his pillow. "It's from when I was a kid. It's nothing."

"But he's so cuuute," Yuuji coos. "Does he have a name?"

"She," Fushiguro corrects, before his face reddens even more. Yuuji's grin grows wider.

"Alright, what's *her* name, then?" He tosses his bag in the corner and hops up onto the bed, reaching out for the plushie. Fushiguro swats his hand away. "I'm not making fun of you, seriously. I used to have plushies too!"

Fushiguro studies him for a moment, clearly thinking. Then he lets out a sigh, his shoulders slumping.

"...Tsumiki," he mumbles.

"Hah?"

"Her name's Tsumiki," Fushiguro repeats, stubbornly refusing to make eye contact. "I had trouble visualising Shiro and Kuro when they first started manifesting, so my guardian got her for me to help. And I couldn't think of another name, so..."

That's the cutest thing Yuuji's ever heard.

"That's the cutest thing I've ever heard," he tells Fushiguro, and Fushiguro promptly hits him over the head. *"Ow*—I'm serious! Fushiguro, that's adorable!"

"If I manifest Shiro and Kuro, will you stop talking about it?" Fushiguro hisses. Yuuji sits up ramrod straight.

"Yes," he says immediately. He takes any opportunity he can get to cuddle with the shikigami, and Fushiguro knows it. "I promise I won't say anything about Tsumiki-chan ever again if you let me hug Shiro and Kuro."

So the Divine Dogs come out. Kuro jumps up onto the bed and lays his head down in Yuuji's lap, which officially cements this afternoon as the best day of Yuuji's life. He coos and buries his face in Kuro's fur as Fushiguro huffs and gets out his laptop. Yuuji watches as he fiddles with it, waiting for it to power up.

Then Fushiguro clears his throat. "Your plushie," he says, and Yuuji looks up. "You said you had one. What was yours called?"

Yuuji can't help but laugh. "Oh, man. Dude, that poor thing. It went through hell."

"You were that bad of a kid?"

"No, just a bad plushie parent," Yuuji says, snickering. "It was a little tiger plushie. I think my grandpa made it for me. Anyway, I took that thing everywhere—like, *everywhere.* I used to chew on its tail for stress relief. God, it was *gross."*

"Do you still have it?"

Yuuji shrugs. "Dunno. I'd have to ask my—"

He cuts himself off before he can say it, those damning words. He can't ask his grandpa where that tiger plushie is. He can't ask his grandpa because his grandpa is dead.

The silence is deafening. In Yuuji's lap, Kuro lets out a low whine.

"Sorry," Fushiguro offers awkwardly. Yuuji shakes his head.

"Nah, it's okay," he says, giving Fushiguro a grin and patting Kuro reassuringly. "Your basket really did help, you know." He reaches out with his foot and hooks it lightly around Fushiguro's ankle. "Thanks, Fushiguro. You're a good friend."

"It was Tsumiki's idea," Fushiguro mutters, but he doesn't unhook Yuuji's foot from around his ankle. A warmth spreads in Yuuji's chest.

"Still," he says, and *god*—it's no wonder his grandpa picked up on how he felt about Fushiguro, because he sounds so stupidly fond. "I appreciated it."

Fushiguro grunts in response. "Focus on the presentation," he says, so Yuuji laughs, and he does.

They work through their presentation in companionable silence. Outside, the rain is constant background noise, a low drumming on the roof and against Fushiguro's bedroom window. A few hours in, Tsumiki—the human Tsumiki, that is, not the dog plushie—sticks her head in and asks if they want snacks. She's got a smile on her face that kind of reminds Yuuji of Kugisaki.

"I'm happy to see you two getting along so well," she says, and for some reason that makes Fushiguro go red and hissy. She laughs when she closes the door.

Yuuji looks at Fushiguro. "What was that?"

"None of your business," Fushiguro grumbles, sinking a little further in his seat. Yuuji shrugs and lets it go.

Everything is fine up until Yuuji decides to leave. The Fushiguros are getting ready for dinner, so he takes it as his cue to go. He packs up, says his goodbyes, opens the door—

And finds that the rain's turned to a fully-fledged storm. Like, a *storm.* Thunder, lightning, all the works. The balcony outside the Fushiguros' front door is drenched, and there are buckets of water rolling off the awning.

"Oh, Itadori-kun," Tsumiki calls from behind him. "Don't tell me you're going out in that!"

Yuuji shrugs. "I'll be fine," he says, but he's not entirely sure he will be. It's pitch-black outside, and he can't really see too far in front of him in this kind of rain. "Or, uh...I should be."

Tsumiki clicks her tongue, coming up behind him. She peers over her shoulder into the rain and frowns.

"How far is your apartment again?" she asks.

Yuuji scratches his head. "...Twenty minutes walking?"

Tsumiki's face turns stern. "No," she says authoritatively. "Absolutely not. You're not walking twenty minutes in *that."* She casts the rain a disdainful look like it's personally wronged her. "Come on, Itadori-kun. If it hasn't let up by the time we finish dinner, you should just stay the night."

Yuuji chokes on his own spit. "Wait, Fushiguro-senpai, I shouldn't—"

Tsumiki waves a hand. "Just call me Tsumiki-senpai," she says. "I think we're friends now, no? And it's no trouble for you to stay. Tomorrow's a Saturday anyway, and we've got a bunch of spare things for when our guardian spends the night. And Megumi doesn't mind, do you, Megumi?"

She calls this last bit over her shoulder. Yuuji twists around to see Fushiguro standing in the kitchen, his face oddly pink.

"No, it's fine," he says, and that's that.

Dinner is a simple curry and rice. They sit at the table in the living room, and Yuuji and Tsumiki chat quietly as Fushiguro eats in silence. Yuuji learns that, while Tsumiki's a decent cook, she doesn't actually *enjoy* it all that much, so she doesn't do a lot of experimenting. In his head, Yuuji's already thinking of recipes he can teach Fushiguro in this timeline. Meatballs, obviously, but also other curries, donburi, noodles...

By the time they finish dinner, the rain's gotten worse.

So Yuuji stays. He has a quick shower, and he brushes his teeth with a disposable toothbrush that the Fushiguros apparently have on hand. They pull out a spare futon for him and lay it out in the living room. Yuuji thanks Fushiguro and Tsumiki over and over again, but they both just shrug it off.

It hits Yuuji all at once later, when the lights are off and he's lying down in the futon, listening to the rain.

Holy shit. He's in Fushiguro's apartment. He's *staying the night in Fushiguro's apartment.* His stomach feels like a butterfly emporium's set up shop there. He curls up on himself, trying to calm down, when—

The kitchen light flicks on. Yuuji freezes. Two sets of footsteps pad quietly into the kitchen. Yuuji hears the gentle clinking of glasses, then the tap being turned on. So they both just came out here for water, then.

"So?" That's Tsumiki. "What's the verdict?"

"I'm not talking about this with you."

Tsumiki snorts. It's such an unexpected noise from her that Yuuji can't help but raise a brow. "Who else will you talk about it with? Gojo-san?"

Fushiguro is silent.

"That's what I thought," Tsumiki says. "Now, spill."

"No."

"Well, if you want *my* opinion," Tsumiki starts, and Fushiguro groans. "Hush. As I was saying—I think he's a nice boy. I approve."

"I don't need your approval," Fushiguro says flatly. "And there's nothing to approve, anyway."

Tsumiki clicks her tongue. "Don't be a brat."

"I'm *not,"* Fushiguro says, in what is admittedly a very bratty voice. "I'm just saying that you don't have to watch out for me all the time. He's—you know, he's..."

He trails off. Yuuji holds his breath.

"I'll be fine with him," he says. Then, quieter, so quietly Yuuji almost doesn't hear him: "He's a good person."

Something in Yuuji's chest constricts, like Fushiguro's reached a hand into his ribcage and closed a fist around his beating heart. Fushiguro thinks he's good. Even now, as Yuuji sleeps in his living room with dozens of Fushiguro's past deaths marked on his skin, Fushiguro thinks he's good.

In the kitchen, Tsumiki laughs softly. "I'm glad," she says. "You needed a friend, Megumi."

Fushiguro grumbles something in response, before setting his cup down with another clink. Then the two of them move off down the hall, their footsteps retreating, and the light turns off again.

It takes Yuuji a long time to fall asleep.

Yuuji wakes up to a door opening. He's still groggy, half-asleep; his elbow's wedged against his chest in a really weird way. His eyes are crusty and gross, and when he blinks them open, he finds the room flooded with light. Distantly, he's aware of the sound of someone loudly taking off their shoes.

"Oiiii, Megumi! Tsumiki!"

Yuuji freezes. Suddenly, he's entirely awake.

That voice is—that's familiar. That's—

"Are you two still sleeping?" Footsteps make their way down the hall. Approaching Yuuji. "Jeez, teenagers. Anyway, guess who's—"

The footsteps come to a halt.

"Huh," Gojo says. "Who're you?"

Of course he knows Yuuji's awake. Yuuji swallows, braces himself for—he doesn't know, actually, but *something*—and rolls over.

Gojo's standing over him, dressed in a casual shirt and pants. He's got a paper bag slung over his elbow with some fancy logo on it, and he peers down at Yuuji through the blindfold. Yuuji offers him a weak grin.

"Uh, hi," he says, cringing at his hoarse voice. "I'm Itadori—"

"Yuuji, yes?" Gojo tilts his head. "I remember you. You were that kid from the town near Sendai." He smiles, but it doesn't really look like a smile; Yuuji feels his cursed energy spike for a moment, a crushing sense of pressure. "Care to explain why in you're in my wards' apartment?"

"I'm, uh—"

"Don't be weird," Fushiguro grouses. Yuuji and Gojo both startle, looking over to find Fushiguro trudging into the living room. He's dressed in his baggy pajamas, and his hair is sticking up even worse than normal; it makes Yuuji feel a stab of nostalgia for the days when he and Fushiguro lived in the dorms next to each other, and he got to see Fushiguro like this every morning. "Itadori, this is Gojo-san. Gojo-san, this is Itadori. He's my project partner from school."

"Your project partner?" Gojo raises his brows. "Has high school changed this much in the last ten years, Megumi? Is it normal for your project partners to stay over?"

"It stormed last night, you..." Fushiguro finishes the rest of that sentence under his breath. Judging from the grin that spreads across Gojo's face, he heard it anyway. "Itadori just stayed over because it was raining too hard." He looks at Yuuji, then. "You want breakfast, Itadori? We've got..." He opens the fridge briefly, scanning its contents before grimacing. "Uh, we've got cereal. Probably."

Gojo tuts. "Is that any way to treat a guest, Megumi? With cereal? That stuff's unhealthy."

"You're the one who bought it."

"And you're the one who kept it!"

"I'm not doing this with you," Fushiguro mutters. "Itadori, I'm sorry about him, he's—"

"Sorry? You little—"

"—a huge moron—"

"I can't believe you're slandering me like this. Where did my cute little Megumi-kun go? Ah, the woes of puberty—"

"—and he's always *weird,"* Fushiguro hisses pointedly, slamming the fridge door shut. He looks over at Yuuji. "So, do you want breakfast?"

Under any other circumstances, Yuuji would say yes. But Gojo tilts his head to look at him, and Yuuji can practically *feel* the Six Eyes. His nape prickles. An instinct, probably—his body is telling him that a predator's got its eye on him. *You are in danger.*

So he shakes his head. "No, I'm okay," he says, getting to his feet. "Thanks, Fushiguro. Seriously." He looks out the window and finds the sky clear and sunny. "I can head home on my own."

Something in Fushiguro's face tightens. "You're sure?" he asks, his eyes darting from one side of Yuuji's face to the other. Yuuji nods mutely. "...Alright then. Safe walk home, Itadori."

Gojo hums. "Oh? You're walking?" He turns around to look right at Yuuji. "Let me escort you out, Itadori-kun. Young kids like you shouldn't be out on the street all alone."

"We're fifteen," Fushiguro says flatly.

"Like I said! Young kids!"

"Itadori, don't mind him," Fushiguro says. "Seriously. He's just weird."

Gojo pouts. He deposits his fancy paper bag on the floor, then claps a hand on Yuuji's shoulder. Yuuji jolts at the contact—Gojo's hand feels heavier than it actually is, a crushing weight.

"Itadori-kun doesn't mind," he says. "Does he?"

Yuuji swallows.

"Uh, I'm fine either way," he says weakly. Fushiguro's eyes dart between him and Gojo suspiciously, but Gojo just grins.

"Great! Let's go, Itadori-kun." He looks at Yuuji, then grimaces. "...But maybe go brush your teeth first. You've got a bit of drool."

Yuuji takes the opportunity to escape. He flees into the hallway, nearly barrelling over Tsumiki, and locks himself in the bathroom to breathe.

This is so *weird.* He's not used to feeling—afraid? He doesn't want to say he's afraid of Gojo. The two things just don't fit together. Gojo's his teacher, his protector, the guy to call if Yuuji's ever in a tight spot...

But *this* Gojo doesn't know him. *This* Gojo met Yuuji once ten years ago and never again. *This* Gojo clearly sees Yuuji as a threat.

This Gojo is the Gojo that scared every cursed spirit in the world into hiding.

So Yuuji swallows. Brushes his teeth. Pisses. Then he goes out to meet what could very possibly be his end.

Gojo's leaning over the table, laughing over something with Tsumiki. When Yuuji steps out, his head immediately snaps in his direction, and his smile turns brittle.

"Ah, Itadori-kun!" He straightens up and claps his hands. "Ready to go?"

Yuuji doesn't trust himself to speak. He nods.

"Wonderful," Gojo says cheerfully. "Tsumiki, Megumi, I'll see you later. Say bye, Itadori-kun!"

Yuuji obediently waves goodbye to Fushiguro and Tsumiki as he follows Gojo out the door. Tsumiki waves back, looking bewildered, but Fushiguro narrows his eyes. He clearly realises there's something going on, but Yuuji's not going to tell him—and, from the looks of it, Gojo won't either.

They step out onto the balcony. "So," Gojo says, as the door swings shut behind them. "Itadori Yuuji. I have to say, I'm surprised to see you again."

"I'm surprised you remember me," Yuuji replies honestly. Gojo lets out a laugh as they start walking towards the stairs. He actually seems less hostile now that the Fushiguros aren't in view anymore, and Yuuji relaxes a little.

"Well, of course I remembered you!" Gojo says. "I'm not going to forget *that* cursed energy in a hurry. Has it always felt like that?"

Yuuji frowns. "Like what?"

Gojo twirls a finger in the air. "Tangled," he says matter-of-factly. "Or layered, I suppose. Like a bunch of wires all bundled together. Sometimes that kind of thing happens—I've got a student whose cursed energy feels serrated, really packs a punch—but I've never seen one like yours." He tilts his head. "It was like this the first time we met, too. So I'm guessing it's just how your energy is?"

For a second, Yuuji has no idea what he's talking about. His cursed energy, as far as he knows, has always been normal. But then he remembers what Kenjaku told him in that cemetery in Sendai, right before he killed him: *your cursed energy is all tangled. I'm sure Gojo Satoru noticed it too.*

The Binding Vow has apparently warped Yuuji on a fundamental level, because it's left his cursed energy tangled—whatever that means. But Yuuji can't tell Gojo that without delving into some explanations he'd rather not have to do, so he just shrugs.

"I don't know," he says. "I've never really thought about it."

"I see. Well, it's certainly something new." They emerge onto the street, and Yuuji has to hold up a hand to shield his eyes from the sun. "You've never really thought about it, you say? So I take it you're not a sorcerer?"

Yuuji shakes his head. Gojo sighs.

"Damn shame," he says critically. "I think you would've been a good one. I went back for you, you know, but you were gone by then." He shoves his hands in his pockets and looks up at the sky. "Now, Itadori-kun, don't take this the wrong way—but let me ask you something, hm?"

"Sure."

Gojo tilts his head down and sideways to look at him. He doesn't touch the blindfold, doesn't lift it or do anything to show his eyes, but Yuuji feels them boring into him anyway.

"Are you targeting my kids?" Gojo asks, his voice suddenly low and deadly serious.

Yuuji stares at him. The sun is behind him; it makes his hair glow like white fire. "Huh?"

"Tsumiki and Megumi," Gojo clarifies, still in that cool, flat voice. "I mean, you show up in Saitama once, on the day I meet them—fine, no worries. Then Tsumiki comes home, nine years after that, with cursed energy left on her, and she tells me a boy named Itadori saved her from a bike—that's a bit odd, no? So I move them to Tachikawa. And *then* I come to check up on them, and I find you sleeping in the living room. So, Itadori-kun—are you doing it on purpose?"

There's that prickling at Yuuji's nape again: *you are in danger.* Gojo's Infinity pushes faintly against his skin like an invisible hydraulic press.

"No," Yuuji blurts out, his heart rabbiting in his chest. "I—no. No. It's really just coincidence."

Gojo cocks his head. "No?"

"No," Yuuji says firmly. For a moment, Gojo says nothing. He does nothing. He just stands like that, unnervingly still.

Then he claps his hands, so suddenly that Yuuji jumps. "Okay, then!" he says brightly. "I believe you, Itadori-kun. In any case, Megumi seems to trust you, and he's got good intuition." He grins down at Yuuji, all teeth. "So I'm trusting you, yes? Don't let me down, Itadori-kun."

He says it lightly, but Yuuji hears it for the threat it is. He swallows. He's got nothing to fear—Gojo will only truly threaten him if he hurts Fushiguro or Tsumiki, and Yuuji would never. He'd *never.*

"I won't, Gojo-san," he replies. "I promise."

Gojo barks out a laugh. "That's what I like to hear!" he says, clapping Yuuji on the shoulder hard enough to make him stumble. On the nearby telephone poles, a flock of birds startle and scatter; Yuuji watches them disperse through the sky, specks of black against the blue.

Yeah. He'll be fine. He's got nothing to worry about—absolutely nothing at all.

Yuuji aces the physics part of his next science quiz. Sasakawa decides that he's no longer in need of a tutor, and his sessions with Tsumiki stop. At around the same time, Yuuji and Fushiguro's presentation is due. Everything goes as planned. Yuuji flashes Fushiguro a thumbs-up after and tells him he's pretty sure they got a good mark.

Logically speaking, there's no reason for Yuuji to hang out with either Fushiguro now. But, for some reason, neither of them stop talking to him.

Tsumiki sort of reminds him of Okkotsu: a well-meaning senior who always checks up on him to make sure he's doing well. She sends Yuuji pictures of dogs that she sees on the way to school, and links to online videos that she says can help him if he finds himself struggling in science again. Yuuji finds himself texting her for advice on other things, too, like when he's at the supermarket and he's not sure how to choose the best fruit. And as for Fushiguro...

Well.

Yuuji's not entirely sure what to say about his relationship with Fushiguro.

They're friends, definitely. Yuuji would even say they're *best* friends—Yuuji spends more time with Fushiguro now than he does with anyone else, and Fushiguro doesn't really talk much to anyone other than Yuuji. They hang out all the time, and Kuro's started following Yuuji around like an adorable shadow.

Sometimes, if Fushiguro's got no homework to do, he even waits for Yuuji to finish his track and field practice so that they can go do something after. He's not the only one—the other boys on the team have siblings, friends, girlfriends who sit there and wait for them too—but it still makes something in Yuuji's chest go all warm and fuzzy when he looks over to the side and sees Fushiguro sitting there, paging quietly through a book. Afterwards, when they go out to the city to grab ice cream or crepes or whatever, Yuuji will sling an arm around Fushiguro's shoulders and pull him in close, and Fushiguro lets him.

It's almost exactly the same as how they acted in the very first timeline, just without all the life-or-death sorcery missions. But there's also one more thing that makes it different:

In this timeline, Yuuji knows he's in love.

He doesn't know if Fushiguro's picked up on it, the way Yuuji stammers sometimes when he gets too close. The way Yuuji blurts out compliments without thinking, because he's got no

brain-to-mouth filter. The way Yuuji's breathing stutters and trips when the sun hits Fushiguro's eyes just so.

If Fushiguro *has* noticed, he hasn't said anything. He's either incredibly oblivious or he just doesn't care. Yuuji doesn't think it's the first one; he knows how analytical Fushiguro's brain is, how good he is at picking apart patterns. So, logically, it has to be the second one.

Yuuji doesn't know how to feel about the second one. If Fushiguro knows and doesn't care, then there's really only two reasons why: he doesn't give a shit about who Yuuji likes, or...

Or he likes Yuuji back.

See, this is why things were easier when Yuuji was just acting like an idiot around Fushiguro without knowing why. Now, it feels like at least forty percent of his brainpower is dedicated to obsessing over every little twitch of Fushiguro's brows, every sideways glance he gives Yuuji. Does he know? Was Yuuji too obvious? And, most importantly, *does he like Yuuji back?*

They're in Akihabara today. Yuuji's on the hunt for a cassette player. Ever since his grandpa died, the cassettes he took from home have become even more valuable. He's explained this to Fushiguro, who looked appropriately sympathetic, and now they're picking through the secondhand electronics shops for a player.

Yuuji sees it almost immediately: a portable cassette player that's identical to the one he and his grandpa had had. He goes for it immediately, just to find that it's priced way higher than most of the other ones.

"You're putting it back?" Fushiguro asks, when Yuuji winces and sets it back down. Yuuji sighs.

"Yeah, way too expensive," he says glumly. "Sucks, though. That's the same one my grandpa had. I'd get it if I could, but..."

He tosses it one last longing look before heading over to check out the rest of the store. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Fushiguro leaning over the player. He strolls around the rest of the store, but his heart's sort of set on that first one, and Fushiguro can clearly tell.

"You should just save up for it," Fushiguro says. "You'll regret it if you buy another one."

And, well...Yuuji can't deny that. So, as per Fushiguro's advice, he asks the shopkeeper to set it aside for him. He leaves his name and contact details and promises to come back in a few months, when he's hopefully saved up enough money to justify buying the player. He's looking for a job now, after all.

As they leave the store, Fushiguro's phone buzzes. He pauses to take it out, and when Yuuji sees the name flashing on the screen, his heart skips a beat.

Kugisaki Nobara

Fushiguro declines the call without a second thought.

Yuuji coughs, trying not to let it show how shocked he is. So Fushiguro—he still knows Kugisaki in this universe, even when he's not a sorcerer?

"Shouldn't you answer that?" he asks, as Fushiguro's phone buzzes with another call. Fushiguro glances down and declines again.

"It's just my friend from another school," he says. "She calls all the time for stupid stuff. If it's really important, she'll—"

Fushiguro's screen lights up with another notification: a text. Then another, and another, and another.

Kugisaki Nobara: *oi*

Kugisaki Nobara: *oi*

Kugisaki Nobara: *oi*

Kugisaki Nobara: *pick up*

Kugisaki Nobara: *pick up pick up pick up*

Kugisaki Nobara: *stop ignoring me i'll punch u*

Kugisaki Nobara: *PICK UPPPPPPPP*

The phone rings again. Fushiguro sighs and pinches his nose, then swipes to answer.

It's a video call—Kugisaki's face fills the screen. For a second, Yuuji just stares at her. She looks just how he remembers, brown hair and two eyes and furious expression.

"Fushiguro!" she barks. "What the hell! I could've been dying!"

"If you were dying, you wouldn't call me," Fushiguro says shortly. "Now say what you want to say so I can get back to what I was doing."

Kugisaki turns her nose up. *"I* am in the very time-sensitive situation of needing to pick a shirt to buy," she says, holding up two clotheshangers. *"You* are probably reading a book or something. Whatever you're doing can't possibly be—"

"I'm with a *friend,"* Fushiguro hisses.

"A friend? From outside the school?" Kugisaki's eyes go comically wide. "Aww, Fushiguro, I'm so proud of you! Did you find them all on your own?"

"I will hang up on you," Fushiguro says.

"I'd just call again," Kugisaki says breezily. "So, who's the friend? You've never—" She freezes. Then, suddenly, a grin breaks out across her face.

"Oh-*ho,"* she says, shoving her face right up into the camera. "It isn't the famous Itadori-kun, is it?"

Yuuji recoils a little at his name. Beside him, Fushiguro jumps like a startled cat. His face abruptly flushes red.

"Kugisaki!"

"What? I'm just curious. Oi, Itadori-kun! If you're there, tell me which shirt looks better!"

For a second, Yuuji's throat closes up. This is—it's *so* close to how things used to be, with the three of them. It's so close, but it's also so far.

He's missed Kugisaki badly. Her boldness, her brashness, even her stupid insults. Fushiguro is here with him now, but Kugisaki, as the only sorcerer out of the three of them, will always be out of reach. Suddenly, Yuuji wants nothing more than to reach through the screen and pull her into a hug.

Instead of doing that, he squints at the screen and tells her, "I like the one on the left."

Kugisaki nods thoughtfully. "I see, I see," she says, glancing at Fushiguro and widening her eyes. "Fushiguro, you picked a good one! Hey, Itadori-kun, when are you and Fushiguro gonna—"

Fushiguro hangs up on her.

Yuuji gapes at him. "Fushiguro! That's rude!"

"She'll get over it," Fushiguro says, glowering at the phone. Kugisaki's already calling back, but Fushiguro hits the decline button with a savage kind of satisfaction. "Sorry about her. She's...ugh. She's a lot."

"She was, uh..." Yuuji racks his brain. "High energy."

"Yeah. I think you two would get along, actually." Fushiguro looks down at his screen. Kugisaki's texting him again, an indignant stream of insults.

Kugisaki Nobara: *is that any way to treat a lady*

Kugisaki Nobara: *everything good that sensei ever said about u was a lie*

Kugisaki Nobara: *im telling him to cut ur allowance*

Fushiguro just rolls his eyes and mutes his notifications. "Gojo-san's her teacher," he says. "He brings me to her school all the time. Kugisaki's just latched on to me because there's no

one who's her age—she's the only first-year." He glances sidelong at Yuuji. "She's, ah...she's a sorcerer, actually."

"Oh." Yuuji knows what this is: it's proof of Fushiguro's trust in him. The fact that he's willing to tell Yuuji who Kugisaki really is—it makes Yuuji feel warm inside, like he's just had some really good soup. "Really?"

Fushiguro nods.

"Cool." Yuuji knocks his shoulder against Fushiguro's. "But I'm more interested in finding out what she meant by 'the famous Itadori-kun'."

Fushiguro's face flushes. "You—shut up," he hisses, shoving Yuuji off of him and stalking off. Yuuji chases after him.

"Fushiguro—hey, Fushiguro, wait—I just wanna know what you tell her!"

"Nothing. I tell her nothing."

"But I'm *famous!* She said so! C'mon, Fushiguro, I've got a right to know, don't I?"

"Oh, fuck *off—"*

Yuuji can't help the laugh that bursts out of him. As Fushiguro tries to weave through a particularly crowded patch of sidewalk, Yuuji tackles him from behind and wraps his arms around him. Fushiguro grunts, but he doesn't move away, and that—*that* is how Yuuji knows he cares.

He leans up to rest his chin on Fushiguro's shoulder. "Come onnn," he sings. Fushiguro groans and shoves him away with a palm to the face, but there's no real force behind it.

Even if Fushiguro doesn't like him back like that, he definitely likes Yuuji as a friend. And, really—who is Yuuji to ask for more? He's already lucky enough.

The weeks slide by. Yuuji splits his days between schoolwork, the track and field team, his friends, Fushiguro, and his job.

Because, yeah. He's got a job now.

His grandfather had a decent amount saved up, and the house in Sendai is technically in Yuuji's name now, so he doesn't have to worry *too* much about money for the time being. Plus, the school pays for his accommodation. But it's still nice to be able to earn money instead of just spending it, so Yuuji decides to become a food delivery biker. It's flexible enough to work with school, and he'll get to exercise at the same time; personally, he sees it as a win-win.

For once, the universe works in his favour: his apartment neighbour, the lady who works at the legal firm, has a bike that she never uses. In return for Yuuji promising to water her plants and to bring her some of the cakes and cookies he occasionally bakes, she lends it to him for free. So now, whenever he's got a couple free hours, Yuuji heads out on the bike and earns himself some cash.

The first time he accidentally delivers food to Fushiguro, he laughs himself sick.

Honestly, he should've seen it coming. He knows that Fushiguro's a terrible cook—Tsumiki must be the one who makes most of their meals. But still, when Fushiguro's name pops up on his screen, he stares at it for a second before accepting the offer with a little burst of warmth in his chest.

It's an order for a beef bowl from some restaurant. Only one, which means Tsumiki probably isn't home. Yuuji gets the bowl, plus a little tub of extra ginger, and he runs to the nearest konbini to get a pack of the ginger candies that Tsumiki always kept on hand for Fushiguro during Yuuji's tutoring sessions. Then he bikes over to Fushiguro's apartment.

Yuuji knocks on the apartment door with a bright excitement fizzing through his veins. He hears shuffling from inside, and then the door swings open to reveal an adorably disgruntled-looking Fushiguro.

"Thank y—*Itadori?"*

Yuuji holds up the bag and grins. "Delivery for Fushiguro?"

Fushiguro stares at him, taking the bag tentatively and dropping it on the ground beside him. "You're a delivery driver?" he says slowly.

"Biker, technically. Cool, right?"

Fushiguro's brows scrunch together. His eyes flick up and down the length of Yuuji's body.

"Do you," Fushiguro says, his voice low and suddenly threatening, *"not* have a helmet?"

Yuuji takes a step back. He doesn't, actually, seeing as the bike isn't even his.

"Um," he says, which is apparently all the answer Fushiguro needs. His face darkens.

"How stupid *are* you?" he hisses. "Biking around Tokyo without a helmet?"

"I'm careful!" Yuuji protests. "Tons of people bike without helmets!"

"Except those people aren't idiots who trip over their own feet," Fushiguro says pointedly. Yuuji's face flushes. The only reason Fushiguro thinks Yuuji's clumsy is that Yuuji gets stupid when he's around him, but he's obviously not telling Fushiguro that.

"I'll be fine," Yuuji tells him. "I've got a thick skull—"

"Yeah, no shit," Fushiguro mutters.

"Not like *that.* You're so mean."

"Oh really?" Fushiguro reaches out and, quick as a snake, bonks Yuuji on the head with his fist. He does it *hard,* too. Yuuji yelps and slaps a hand to his hair.

"Fushiguro!"

"That hurt, didn't it?" Fushiguro says acidly. "Your 'thick skull' isn't gonna protect you from anything. Wait here."

He disappears into the apartment before Yuuji can say anything else. Yuuji just stands there dumbly, one hand held to his aching head, as clattering sounds come from further inside.

Finally, Fushiguro reappears. In his hands, he's holding...

"Fushiguro, seriously, I don't—"

"I will hit you until you wear this," Fushiguro says, entirely serious. Yuuji winces.

When Fushiguro steps forward to put the bright pink helmet on Yuuji's head, Yuuji lets him do it. He stays still, even tilts his head a little to make it easier.

"Is this Tsumiki-senpai's?"

Fushiguro snorts. "What, you think *I* wore a pink helmet when I was learning to ride a bike?"

Yuuji shrugs. "Why not?"

"Well, I didn't. This is Tsumiki's. Be grateful she had a big head for a twelve-year-old girl." Fushiguro adjusts the helmet, then slides his hands down to fiddle with the strap at Yuuji's chin. "Hold still."

Yuuji does. He barely breathes. It's partially because he knows how painful it is to get the skin of his neck caught in the buckle, but it's also partially because, well—

Fushiguro's *right there.* He's standing so close, his head tilted down so he can squint at the buckle. His fingers are cool, ghosting lightly along the soft skin under Yuuji's jaw; Yuuji shivers a little at the touch, feeling like he's being electrified. Like this, he's got a front-row seat to Fushiguro's eyes. They're downcast, focused on the helmet strap, his lashes like a dark curtain; Yuuji stares and stares and stares. When Fushiguro tests the helmet tightness, sliding two fingers into the gap between the strap and Yuuji's jaw, Yuuji just about stops breathing.

"That seems alright," Fushiguro murmurs to himself, tugging on the strap a little. It makes Yuuji's head jerk forward, and a tiny noise escapes his throat. Fushiguro looks up.

They make eye contact.

Yuuji freezes, his face burning. He feels like he's been caught in the act, but—

But Fushiguro doesn't look away. He holds Yuuji's gaze, calm and steady. He swallows; Yuuji inadvertently stares at the bob of his throat.

"There," Fushiguro says quietly, letting go of the helmet strap. Is it Yuuji's imagination, or is his voice slightly hoarse? "Now you're good to go."

Yuuji blinks. He feels like he's coming out of a daze, a state of hypnosis. "Huh?"

Fushiguro clears his throat. "Your helmet," he says, reaching up to rap his knuckles against it. "You can go now."

"Oh. Hah. Right," Yuuji says stupidly. He stands there, just staring, until Fushiguro shoves his shoulder lightly. That's when Yuuji's brain comes back online, and he stumbles towards the stairs with a burning face and a racing, bumbling heart.

"Itadori," Fushiguro calls, right as he reaches the stairwell. Yuuji, as always, turns back.

Fushiguro's standing in the doorway, one hand on the wall. He stares at Yuuji for a moment, worrying his lip, before he coughs and says, "It looks good. Uh, the helmet. It...matches your hair."

An involuntary grin spreads across Yuuji's face. "It does, doesn't it?" he says, reaching up to touch the helmet. He sounds stupidly infatuated, but he can't bring himself to care. "Thanks, Fushiguro. Seriously."

Fushiguro waves him off. He retreats into the apartment and shuts the door, but Yuuji catches the faintest blush of pink along the tips of his ears.

When Yuuji heads off into the night, his new helmet sitting snugly on his head, his heart feels like it's been replaced by a miniature sun.

It takes Yuuji a stupid amount of "good luck, Itadori"'s from his classmates to figure out that everyone's expecting him to do well at the sports festival. They're in August now, and the festival is coming up soon; the track and field team has amped up training, and the coach has been drilling Yuuji harder lately, but Yuuji hadn't realised that news about his athletic prowess had spread to the rest of his year. He's apparently the team's brightest hope for the festival.

"Everyone's expecting to see you break some records," Ikeda says one morning before class, nudging Yuuji good-naturedly. "That's what the other guys on the track team have been saying."

"Yeah, you're meant to be the reincarnation of Mirko Cro Cop or something," Hirano adds.

"Mirko Cro Cop is still alive," Fushiguro chimes in flatly from where he sits behind Yuuji. He's immersed in a book, but Yuuji's always made it clear that whatever conversation he's in, Fushiguro is also welcome to be in. Yuuji beams at him now.

"Then maybe I'm, like, his spiritual reincarnation," he says. "His metaphorical child."

Fushiguro wrinkles his nose. "That's not how reincarnation works. Or how metaphors work."

"Hey, you don't know that. No one knows how reincarnation works."

"I know enough to say that you can't be the reincarnation of someone who's alive."

"Well, what if he's dead inside?"

"Dude," Ikeda says, and Yuuji blinks. He'd forgotten that it wasn't just him and Fushiguro in this conversation. It's kind of scary how easily he forgets about everything else when he talks to him. "Don't say stuff like that. What if you curse him or something?"

At Yuuji's feet, Kuro lifts his head at the word 'curse'. Yuuji surreptitiously pushes him down and laughs it off. But then later, at lunch, Fushiguro brings it up again—not Mirko Cro Cop, but the other thing.

"So?" Fushiguro asks over their food. Yuuji looks at him quizzically.

"So what?"

"So, are you going to break any records? At the sports festival, I mean."

Yuuji shrugs. "Eh, I don't really mind either way. It's cool if I do and cool if I don't. Like, what do I even get out of it?"

"Bragging rights," Fushiguro says. "Popularity."

"Oh, come on. You know I don't care about stuff like that."

Fushiguro looks up at him. He's sitting in his chair, and Yuuji's sitting on his desk, so Fushiguro has to actually tilt his head up to make eye contact. "Not even if it gets you a date?"

Yuuji chokes on his food. Like—inhaled, stuck in his throat, can't breathe kind of chokes. He doubles over, wheezing, and Fushiguro thumps him on the back until it dislodges.

He gasps for air. "Wh—huh?" Is Fushiguro—there's no way he's offering—

"You seriously haven't noticed?" Fushiguro raises a brow. "There's a whole gang of girls who are lining up to ask you out, you know. If you break a record at the festival, I bet one of them would finally do it."

...Oh. Yeah. That makes a lot more sense. Yuuji clears his throat, swallowing back the bitter taste of unreasonable disappointment.

"Uh, I'm not really interested," he says lamely. Fushiguro scoffs. "Wha—hey! I'm serious!"

"Alright, then," Fushiguro says, though Yuuji can tell he doesn't really believe him. "What *are* you interested in?"

"Dunno," Yuuji says, leaning in, and he has to have lost a few braincells from choking earlier, because there's no other explanation for what he says next. "What are you willing to give me?"

It takes him a full five seconds to process the words. For all of those five seconds, Fushiguro stares at him like he's grown a second head.

Yuuji slaps a hand over his mouth. Oh, god. He needs to crawl into a hole and die. Why would he—what on earth—what *possessed* him to say something like that?

Then Fushiguro raises a brow. "You sound like you're making a bet," he says.

"Well, maybe I am," Yuuji says. Then, because he needs to do *something* to break the weird tension: "Bet you I can break three records."

"Don't get cocky," Fushiguro says, narrowing his eyes. "It doesn't suit you. I bet you can't."

"Hey! I so can!" Yuuji starts ticking them off on his fingers. "Relay, hundred metres, two hundred metres, four hundred—"

"If it's all just running events, it doesn't count."

"Now you're just being petty," Yuuji says. "Alright, fine. I bet I can break a record in the hundred metres, *and* the relay, *and,* uh..." He racks his brain. "...shotput."

Fushiguro crosses his arms. "You don't sound too sure about that last one. *I* bet you can't do it."

Yuuji grins. "Is that an actual bet? What do I get if I win?"

Fushiguro looks at him for a moment. There's a glint in his eye that Yuuji's never quite seen before, but then he blinks and it's gone.

"Whatever you want," Fushiguro says. "Within reason. But I already know you'd just use it to force me to watch Human Earthworm 4 with you."

"I would not," Yuuji says, offended, even though that's exactly what he was planning to do. "Alright, fine. Bet I can break a record in all three events. Winner gets anything?"

"Anything," Fushiguro confirms. "When I win, I'm making you wash that gross yellow hoodie of yours."

"Hey! My hoodie's perfectly clean!" Yuuji protests. "And when *I* win, I'm making you eat red bell peppers till you puke."

Fushiguro calls him disgusting, so Yuuji says it's his own fault for being a picky eater, and just like that, they're back to how they usually are. But when the bell rings, and Yuuji settles back into his seat, he looks back and sees it again: that weird glint in Fushiguro's eye. It makes Yuuji's heart do somersaults in his chest.

Just to be sure, he looks up the school's record for shotput. It's less than the national record, which Yuuji beat that one time he competed against Coach Takagi in Sendai, so Yuuji knows he can win. He can't help but giggle to himself. He probably *will* just end up making Fushiguro watch Human Earthworm with him, but still. The idea of having a bet with Fushiguro—an inside joke, a deal, a bargain that's just the two of them—it makes Yuuji feel kind of giddy.

When the sports festival rolls around, he's ready.

It happens on a Saturday. Yuuji, along with the rest of the track and field team, helps set up. He watches as students and their families come filtering into the school grounds, and he can't help the way his heart twists a bit. He's long since made his peace with the fact that he won't have anyone showing up for his school events—his grandpa got hospitalised when he was in middle school, after all—but it still feels a little lonely. Once the majority of the school has arrived, Yuuji looks around for a place to put his bag down. He shields his eyes with his hand, searching, searching—

"Itadori-kun! Over here!"

Yuuji looks over. And there, in the shade of a tree, are the Fushiguros. Tsumiki's waving him over, while Fushiguro lays out a picnic blanket on the grass.

Yuuji's heart does something funny in his chest.

He makes a beeline right for them. Fushiguro gives him a little wave, while Tsumiki tuts at the redness of Yuuji's cheeks. "Did you even put any sunscreen on?" she asks, and Yuuji winces as he tells her no.

She makes Fushiguro put it on him. Fushiguro's hands are careful when he does it, methodical swipes along Yuuji's cheeks and forehead. Yuuji tries to keep himself from blushing and fails miserably.

The three of them sit together on the picnic blanket and watch the opening ceremonies. Yuuji sees some of his friends in the band, so he cheers and throws them thumbs-up signs. Then after that is the marathon, which everyone is required to participate in. The boys are up first; Yuuji weaves his way through the crowd until he finds Fushiguro.

Shiro and Kuro are already manifested by his side, clearly intending to keep their master company throughout the run. Yuuji gives them both friendly scratches, then gives Fushiguro an equally-friendly shoulder bump. Fushiguro sways to the side a little, even though Yuuji really didn't hit him that hard, and he raises a brow.

"What're you doing?" he asks. "Shouldn't you be up front? You're the track team's new poster boy."

Yuuji shrugs. "It's the marathon, who cares?" he says. "Everyone's participating anyway. I'd rather run next to you." Then he leans in, flashing Fushiguro a grin. "Besides, I don't have to break any records for this one. Relay, hundred metres, and shotput, remember?"

Fushiguro flicks his forehead, hard enough to sting. "I told you not to be cocky," he says, and Yuuji can't help but laugh.

The rest of the sports festival passes in a sunny daze. Yuuji, true to his word, jogs alongside Fushiguro for the marathon, with Shiro and Kuro flanking them on either side. They finish at respectable places in the top fifty, and Tsumiki's ready for them at the end of it with bottles of water and little cut sandwiches that she prepared at home. Then it's time for the girls' marathon, so Yuuji and Fushiguro both cheer for Tsumiki in turn—well, Yuuji cheers. Fushiguro gives her a thumbs-up. Tsumiki beams at them both.

Then there come a host of other events. Fushiguro and Tsumiki have done their quota for the day by participating in the marathon, so they sit in the shade and watch Yuuji's events instead. It's a new feeling, having someone there to watch him; it makes Yuuji feel electrified. When it comes to the hundred-metre-sprint, Yuuji throws Fushiguro a wink from the starting line. Fushiguro rolls his eyes, and, to Yuuji's delight, Kuro materialises out of Yuuji's shadow, wagging his tail. When Yuuji crosses the finish line, setting a new record for the school, Kuro is right there with him.

One down. Two to go.

The relay is the last event of the day, so Yuuji focuses on the shotput. He has to throw it properly this time, not like how he did it with Coach Takagi. He wobbles a bit, unused to the form, but—

He throws. Twenty-five metres. At his side, Kuro throws his head back and lets out a celebratory howl.

Two down. One to go. On the picnic blanket, Tsumiki's applauding, but Fushiguro looks wholly unimpressed. Shiro, though, who's flopped over Fushiguro's lap, gives him away—the shikigami's tail is wagging like crazy, and Yuuji can't help but grin.

When the relay rolls around, Yuuji slaps his teammates on the back and rolls his shoulders. Kuro's at his side again, as he has been all day. The shikigami weaves around Yuuji's legs, panting excitedly as the baton gets closer, closer—

They say that in relays, you should always put the fastest runner last. Yuuji crosses the finish line a full five seconds before the runner-up.

Three down. None to go. As Yuuji's teammates crowd him, all four of them celebrating, Yuuji seeks out Fushiguro's eyes over the crowd.

Fushiguro's smiling. It's that quirked up little half-smile again. Yuuji stares at him and feels like he could eat the sun.

Yuuji stays back to help pack up the festival stuff, obviously. So do most of the students, but by the time the sun starts setting, people have started to leave. Eventually, it's just Yuuji and a few other stragglers from the track and field team putting away the last of the tents and the field markers. And the Fushiguros, of course, but even Tsumiki leaves eventually, having to get started on dinner. She gives Yuuji one last celebratory hug as she leaves, waving goodbye in the gold light of the setting sun.

"You're not heading back with her?" Yuuji asks, when he notices that Fushiguro's still packing up the tents. They're at a far corner of the field, far away enough that the other last few students left aren't really paying attention to them. Fushiguro glances at Yuuji.

"No," he says simply. Yuuji wants to ask why not, but...

But he thinks he already knows why.

He reaches out to help Fushiguro with the tent. "So," he says casually. "I broke three records."

"You did," Fushiguro agrees, unusually compliant.

"I won the bet."

"You did."

Yuuji turns to look at him. Fushiguro, in response, turns and looks back. In the fading sunlight, he looks like a bronze statue, his skin golden and his eyes bright as jewels.

He's beautiful, and Yuuji loves him.

Yuuji opens his mouth. It's thoughtless—he doesn't know what he's going to say.

In fact, he never gets to know what he's going to say, because Fushiguro kisses him.

Time stops. The sun goes still. Everything in the world narrows down to this moment, immortal and golden.

Fushiguro's kissing him. Fushiguro's *kissing* him. Yuuji's on fire. He's combusted. He's been disassembled and put back together again. The synapses of his brain have been replaced with bright fizzy sparklers, like the kind that kids use on New Year's.

Fushiguro draws back, hesitant, and Yuuji immediately wants to pull him back in again. His gaze flicks from Yuuji's mouth to his eyes. "...Sorry. I should've asked before I—"

Yuuji kisses him again with so much force their teeth knock together. Fushiguro hisses into his mouth, but he doesn't pull away, so Yuuji reaches up to tangle a hand in his hair and pull him closer.

It's the Big Bang. It's the beginning of all things. It's everything good and beautiful that's ever existed. It's Fushiguro, and Yuuji's kissing him.

They break apart for air eventually. Yuuji gulps down a breath, his eyes fixed on the red flush of Fushiguro's cheeks, the swell of his lips.

"Fushiguro—"

"Megumi," Fushiguro interrupts. A firework goes off in Yuuji's chest.

"Megumi?"

"I don't want you calling me Fushiguro after you've *kissed* me," Fushi—*Megumi* says, wrinkling his nose like it should be obvious. "So...Megumi. If you want."

"I want," Yuuji says, giddy. "I really, *really* want."

"Alright, don't get too excited," Megumi mutters, but he's blushing furiously. Yuuji can't help the laugh that bubbles up out of his throat. He's just—he feels so—he's *happy.* He ducks in, pressing another kiss to Megumi's mouth, before a light goes off in his head.

He pulls back. "Hey," he breathes, and Megumi's eyes flutter open to look at him. *How* does he just walk around looking like that all the time? Yuuji's heart can't take it. "You said I can get anything for the bet, right? Anything I want?"

"Within reason."

"I want to go on a date with you," Yuuji says immediately.

Megumi snorts out a laugh, leaning forward to rest his head on Yuuji's shoulder. "Dumbass," he says, his breath warm on Yuuji's collarbone. "You didn't need to win a bet to ask me to do that."

So they're dating now.

This is, quite possibly, the best development of Yuuji's short life.

They're dating. They're *dating.* He's dating *Fushiguro Megumi,* who is *his boyfriend.* He's walking around grinning like a total idiot all the time, because he can barely believe it.

His friends tease him about it. "So *that's* why you were so weird about him!" Ikeda cries, slapping the table as Yuuji laughs. "Dude!"

It's amazing. Yuuji looks at Megumi, and he wants to kiss him, and he just—can. He spends more time at Megumi's apartment than he does at his own, now. He's started teaching Megumi how to cook, even though Tsumiki warned him that it was a lost cause. Yuuji doesn't mind. Even if Megumi's the most hopeless chef in the world, Yuuji will help him for as long as he needs it. Even if he keeps clipping his hip on the kitchen island. Even if Megumi keeps

mixing up his sauces. Even if Yuuji has to eat all the failed creations so that the food doesn't go to waste.

He doesn't care. He gets to spend time with Megumi, and that makes it all worth it. Even the days where they just do all the house chores together are great. Yuuji's never looked forward to folding socks more than when he gets to do it with Megumi.

(Is this what they missed, in all the timelines before this? In the very first timeline, the original one—if they'd gotten enough time, could they have had this?)

Megumi's a lot more open with him now, too. Not to the point of having big heart-to-heart talks—it'd probably take years for them to get there—but, when Tsumiki pulls out the baby photos, Megumi lets Yuuji look at them instead of slamming the album shut and running off with it. Yuuji coos over baby Megumi (well, six-year-old Megumi, since that's the youngest age Gojo knew him at) long after the novelty's worn off.

"You're still looking at that?" Megumi grumbles one night in early October. They've just finished watching a movie, and they're splayed out on Megumi's bed. Tsumiki the plushie sits with her back turned to them, because Megumi felt weird about her watching him cuddle with his boyfriend. Yuuji's flipping through photos he took of the album with his phone, giggling.

"Can you blame me?" he asks. "You were so *cute.* Look, look at this one." He pulls up a picture of a disgruntled Megumi in his elementary school uniform. Megumi squints at it.

"Huh," he says. "That one's really old. I think that was when we still lived in my dad's apartment. Ugh, that place was shitty. It was basically falling apart."

"Oh, I remember that," Yuuji says without thinking. He doesn't realise what he's just said until Megumi goes entirely still.

"What do you mean," Megumi says slowly, "you *remember* that?"

Yuuji freezes. Slowly, he looks up.

Megumi's staring at him with narrowed eyes. Yuuji gulps.

"I promise I'm not a stalker," he says quickly.

"That's not helping."

"Okay, but I'm not!" Yuuji holds up his hands. "It's just—you know Gojo-san? Crazy story, but I ran into him the day he met you. I saw you that day, just from a distance. You can ask him about it if you want. I *swear* I'm not a stalker."

Megumi's eyes have been getting wider and wider with every word Yuuji says. Oh, god. Yuuji's just digging himself into a hole with every word, isn't he? He's ruined it all. Megumi thinks he's a stalker and he'll never want to talk to him again. Yuuji grimaces, already preparing to draw back—

Then Megumi slaps a hand against the bed.

"So it *was* you!" he all but shouts, and Yuuji nearly topples off the bed in shock. "You asshole! I thought I was crazy for years!"

Yuuji gapes at him. *"What?"*

Megumi points an accusing finger at him. "You *idiot,"* he seethes. "I swear I saw you, right before Gojo-san left—but you know what he said when I asked him? He said there was no one else there! And Tsumiki didn't see you either! So I just—for *years*—all I remembered was your *stupid—pink—hair—"*

With each word, he grabs a fistful of Yuuji's hair and yanks. Yuuji yelps, slapping his wrist.

"Hey! I yield, I yield!"

"Years," Megumi says murderously, before he finally lets go. "And you didn't think to tell me?!"

"I didn't know you saw!"

"Still! I would've liked to know!"

"Well, now you do!" Yuuji says. They're both kind of yelling at this point, but they're just being loud for the sake of being loud. Megumi falls quiet, still glaring down at Yuuji; Yuuji rests his cheek on Megumi's chest and pouts up at him.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay?" he says. "I should've told you. But it's cute that you remembered me." He blinks, remembering that confusing conversation he'd had when Megumi first asked him if he was a sorcerer, and he grins. "Is that why Shiro kept staring at me at the start of the year?"

Megumi flushes, which is how Yuuji knows he's right. "Shut up," he mutters, and Yuuji laughs. "Ugh. You're so annoying."

"But you love me," Yuuji sings, snuggling further into Megumi's chest. They're curved around each other like interlocking links, Yuuji's head on Megumi's chest and Megumi's knees on Yuuji's thighs. When Megumi breathes out, Yuuji can feel it ruffling his hair. "What happened after that, anyway? Did Gojo-san just whisk you and Tsumiki-nee-chan off?"

Megumi goes still.

"...Not exactly," he says slowly, and Yuuji's grin slowly fades.

Oh. Something bad happened.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Yuuji says, but Megumi sighs. He ghosts a hand down Yuuji's spine.

"It's just a pain, is all," he says quietly. "Gojo-san's original plan was for me to be a sorcerer so that the school would fund us, but I said I didn't want to, so he used his own family's money instead. They were mad about it, obviously, but they can't do anything. Not as long as Gojo-san's around."

That's...ominous. Yuuji's hand tightens on Megumi's waist. "And what if he's not around?"

Megumi sighs again. "Well, Tsumiki and I owe the Gojo clan our lives," he says. "So we're technically part of the clan. Even though we kept our name, we're considered a branch of the Gojos now. If we get an order from the clan elders and Gojo-san's not around to veto it, we have to obey. And..." He hesitates. "...if either of us have any children, they'll be part of the Gojo clan. I think that's why the elders agreed, in the end." He lets out a bitter-sounding laugh. "Can you imagine if I end up passing on my technique? The Zen'in's Ten Shadows in the Gojo clan? God, it'd be a nightmare."

Yuuji feels sick to his stomach. So he'd managed to keep Megumi from being sold to sorcery, but now he's indebted to the Gojos instead. Of course, Gojo—Gojo Satoru, that is—won't let anything bad happen to him or Tsumiki, but...

But Gojo Satoru will be sealed by the end of October. By the end of *this month.*

"That sucks," Yuuji says now, his voice muffled in Megumi's shirt. "That's—that's so—*ugh.* I want to go yell at them all for you."

Megumi snorts. "Oh yeah? What would you say?"

"Dunno. Call them a bunch of old farts or something. Then I'd chew them out for treating you like cattle."

"My knight in shining armour," Megumi says dryly, running a hand down Yuuji's back. "...I really do mean that, you know."

"What?" Yuuji frowns. "The knight bit?"

"Yeah. You know, rushing in, saving me and all."

The words leave a rock in Yuuji's throat. "What'd I save you from?"

"It's complicated," Megumi murmurs, shifting a little. "But me and Tsumiki...I always thought we had a fragile life. I'm glad I get to share it with you."

Oh.

Oh, wow.

Yuuji's going to explode from all the feelings he's feeling. He blinks back tears and wraps his arms around Megumi even tighter, like he'll never let go. "Me too," he says, and he feels Megumi press a gentle kiss to the bone of his temple. There's a mark there left over from Shinjuku, when Megumi died from brain damage caused by Infinite Void. "I'm happy you're here too."

You'll never know how happy, he thinks to himself, as Megumi kisses the mark of his own death again. All those lives, all those deaths—they've led up to this, to Megumi in his arms, alive and relatively safe.

Megumi will never know how much pain it took for them to get here. Silently, Yuuji resolves to never tell him.

"Hey, what d'you get for someone who's going through a break-up? Like, for support?"

"What?" Megumi says sharply through the phone. Yuuji giggles to himself. Ever since they started dating, Yuuji's gotten into the habit of calling Megumi while he does his delivery rounds on the bike. It works out well, because Yuuji gets to hear Megumi's voice, and Megumi gets background noise for his studying.

"Why do you need something for a break-up?" Megumi demands now.

"Not for *me,* idiot. I'm never breaking up with you," Yuuji says. He ignores the gagging sound Megumi makes in response. "It's for my customer. She put it in the notes."

"The notes?"

"Yeah, wait, let me find it." Yuuji leans his bike against the park bench he's stopped at, swiping out of the call so that he can open up the delivery app. *"Ahem*—'Please get extra chocolate sauce if you can. I'm going through a bad break-up right now and I'm craving sweet things.' Like, doesn't that make you feel bad for her?"

There's a rustle on the other end of the line, and then Tsumiki's voice comes through. "Did I hear that right, Yuuji-kun?" she asks. That's what she calls him now, ever since he and Megumi started dating: *Yuuji-kun*. "You're asking for advice on what to get for your food delivery customer, because she's going through a break-up?"

"Well, yeah," Yuuji says, tilting his wrist to squint at his watch. 8:32. He's got time. "I figured I could get her, like, some extra sweets from a konbini or something, but I don't know what girls do when they have break-ups. Is it insulting if I get her more food than she asked for?"

"No, I think that's very sweet of you, Yuuji-kun," Tsumiki says, sounding distinctly amused. "Maybe get her some chocolate? Most people like chocolate. Or some fruit candies."

"Just get her chocolate," Megumi interrupts. "She said she wanted extra chocolate sauce, right? So she must like chocolate."

"Oh, yeah," Yuuji says, grinning at nothing like a dope. "I totally forgot about that. You're so smart, Megumi."

"He is, isn't he?" Tsumiki says. Megumi hisses something to her that makes her huff out a laugh. "Alright, Yuuji-kun, we'll leave you to your job now. I hope your customer enjoys the extra chocolate!"

"Yeah, me too. Thanks, Tsumiki-nee-chan. Megumi, are you okay to stay on the line?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Megumi says. There's another rustle in the background, presumably Tsumiki moving away. "Anything new happen in the five hours since we last saw each other?"

It's a joke, in his own dry Megumi way, but something actually *did* happen. Yuuji pouts, even though Megumi can't see it through the phone. "Yeah, and it *sucks,"* he says. "I went back to get that cassette player—you remember, right?"

"The one your grandpa had?"

"Uh-huh. And get this—the guy sold it!" Yuuji throws up his hands. "After I asked him to set it aside and everything!"

"He probably forgot. It happens a lot."

"Yeah, but it still sucks," Yuuji says. "That's why I wanna get this girl something to cheer her up, you know? Like—my day sucked, so if I can make *her* day suck a little less, it'll make me feel better. You know what I mean?"

There's the audible thump of Megumi's head hitting the table. He grumbles something too low for Yuuji to make out.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, it's just—you're so—" Megumi groans like he's trying to solve the world's most complicated puzzle. "Nevermind."

Yuuji grins to himself. "Love you too," he says, too happy to convince himself that he should reel the words back in. On the other end of the line, Megumi makes a choked sound.

"...Yeah," he says, his voice strained. "Okay."

He doesn't say it back. But the fact that he hadn't told Yuuji to shut up—the fact that he'd *accepted* it—well. For Yuuji, that's answer enough.

And, when he bikes past Megumi's apartment building and a familiar black dog comes bounding up beside him to keep him company for the rest of the night...in Yuuji's eyes, that's even better than *I love you too.*

At first, when Yuuji tastes the blood in his mouth, he thinks he's pushed himself too far in training.

He braces his elbows on his knees, breathing hard through his mouth, but apart from the blood taste he feels fine. Sure, the coach pushed them hard today—lots of endurance training, lots of drills—but Yuuji just feels a normal amount of tired. He sticks a finger in his mouth just to check, but it comes out fine and unbloodied. He frowns. Maybe he should go ask the coach about it. But then he checks the time and curses.

He and Megumi are meant to be meeting up today to watch Human Earthworm 4. Yuuji's already running late. If he leaves right now, he'll still be able to get there while the trailers are playing. He chews his lip, thinking...

He can deal with the weird bloody taste tomorrow. So he bids his teammates and coach goodbye and runs to the gate.

The bloody taste gets stronger the further out he walks. Yuuji tries hacking up a cough, in case it's phlegm or something, but nothing happens. He smacks his lips, looking around, and —

Oh.

Now everything makes sense.

There's a curse prowling around near the sports shed. It's kind of humanoid—two arms, two legs, one head—but that's about as close to a human as it gets. It's tall and thin, its body one twisted mass of purple flesh like a copper wire, and it's got a wide mouth full of sharp, needlelike teeth. It has no eyes, but it has four sunken sockets in its face. When Yuuji opens his mouth, the bloody tang gets way stronger—that must be the taste of its cursed energy.

It's a Grade Two, probably. Yuuji drums his fingers against his knee. He could exorcise it, but it would get messy. More importantly, it would take up time. He's already running late for his date with Megumi, and there's no one left in the school right now...

Ah, fuck it.

Yuuji leaves the curse where it is and takes off running towards the train station. He'll exorcise it tomorrow, or before school starts if it's causing issues. But surely one more day can't hurt.

He shoots Megumi a text on the way. *Omw,* he says, before spamming a bunch of heart emojis. *Get us some popcorn!! Caramel flavour :DD*

When he gets there, he finds Megumi already in the theatre. The screen is still playing trailers, and Yuuji breathes a sigh of relief as he picks his way through the seats to get to him.

"Sorry, sorry," he says, dropping a kiss to Megumi's cheek. "Practice ran late. You got us popcorn?"

"Mm." Megumi passes him the bucket. Yuuji pops a piece into his mouth, then pauses.

"This is extra butter," he says slowly. "I thought I said caramel?"

Megumi shifts in his seat. "Yeah, but you like butter better, right?" he mutters, and Yuuji—Yuuji—

He leans over and peppers the whole side of Megumi's face with kisses. Megumi grumbles about it, but he doesn't shove Yuuji away, and Yuuji—

Damn. He really is in love.

The curse with the bloody-tasting energy doesn't show up at school again the next day, and Yuuji doesn't hear anyone complaining about strange occurrences, so he lets it go. But, as he sits through class, he finds himself turning it over and over in his head.

A Grade Two curse shouldn't be anywhere near school grounds. Fly-heads, sure, but not something as strong as a Grade Two. That's why schools and hospitals keep cursed objects on their premises—they ward away the stronger curses.

Something's not right.

Yuuji resolves to check on the Inumaki tongue in the sports shed, just in case. Just so he can take care of that nagging feeling that something's off. He has track practice again, and this time, Megumi waits for him. When practice is over and the sun's sinking into the horizon, Yuuji waits until everyone else leaves before he heads over to Megumi and asks if he could wait.

"I'm just gonna check out the cursed object they keep here," he says, jerking a thumb in the direction of the sports shed. "Just to make sure it's still working."

Megumi's head snaps up. "What? Do I need to call Gojo-san?"

"No, no, it should be fine," Yuuji reassures him. Megumi narrows his eyes nonetheless, and he summons the Divine Dogs before Yuuji can tell him it's okay. Shiro curls around Megumi's feet, while Kuro bounds over to Yuuji's side.

"Take Kuro with you," Megumi says. "He'll sniff out anything weird."

Yuuji ruffles Kuro's fur. "You're okay to wait?"

Megumi sighs. "I left my pencilcase in our classroom anyway," he says, standing. "I'll go get it. Just call me when you're done."

"Okay." Yuuji leans in and presses a kiss to the corner of his mouth. He'll never get tired of it, just kissing Megumi whenever he can. "Thanks. I won't be long."

They part ways there, with Megumi and Shiro heading into the school and Yuuji and Kuro going to the sports equipment shed. Yuuji pushes open the shed door with a creak and turns on the single lightbulb.

He heads straight to the little crevice in the back corner where he found the Inumaki tongue during orientation. But when he peers into the little crack, he finds it empty.

Goosebumps prickle along his arms. Alright, fine. Maybe it fell out. Maybe someone took it. Yuuji always knew a sports equipment shed was a bad place for a cursed object—people *love* to poke around in equipment sheds.

Yuuji searches all around the shed, but soon enough it's undeniable: the tongue is gone. Uneasiness grows in the pit of his stomach. Kuro sniffs around too, but the only thing he alerts Yuuji to is the crevice where the tongue used to be.

"It's not there, boy," Yuuji tells him, but Kuro whines, pawing at the crevice again. Yuuji sighs and peers back in. "Seriously, Kuro, there's nothing—"

Wait.

There *is* something there. It's far back, too small to be the tongue, but it's something reflective. Yuuji wriggles his arm in to grab it.

His hand closes around something small and hard. He pulls his fist out, unfolding it to reveal —

His heart stops. The world stops.

In the dim light of the sports shed, Yorozu's tooth shines a sickly white.

For a second, Yuuji's brain blanks out entirely. Then it kicks back in at fucking—two-hundred-percent capacity, a thousand and one possibilities running through his head.

Fuck. *Fuck.* Realistically, Yuuji knows that it could be anyone's tooth. It could be a prank by one of the students, or some kid trying to recreate an occult ritual. But Yuuji looks at it and *knows,* deep in his bones, that this is the same tooth Tsumiki threw away last March. It carries the tiniest spark of cursed energy, thrumming just below the surface. Sealed.

It's a clear message: Kenjaku was here. He must have taken the tongue, too. But—*why* would he take it? An Inumaki tongue can't be that valuable, can it? The Inumaki that Yuuji knows would've mentioned something about it if it was. It's not like Sukuna's finger. All the tongue was doing was warding curses away from the school. Without it, the only thing that will happen is...

At Yuuji's side, Kuro's head jolts up. Instinctively, Yuuji drops a hand to the shikigami's head, and he finds Kuro trembling with tension. He's staring at the open shed door, his ears pricked and his eyes blown wide.

"What is it, boy?" Yuuji asks. "What—"

Kuro takes off like a bullet. He disappears in a blur of black, sprinting through the shed door and out into the fading light. "Hey!" Yuuji shouts, running out after him. "Kuro, what—"

A wave of cursed energy hits him so hard he chokes. It shoves itself up his nose, down his throat, makes his stomach churn. When he looks up again, he sees Kuro running straight into the school—the school, which is no longer protected by the Inumaki tongue. The school, which is currently *radiating* cursed energy.

The school, where Megumi is.

Yuuji feels a wave of ice wash over him. Right on cue, a howl sounds from inside the school. Kuro answers it. Answers it, because that was *Shiro*—Shiro, who was with Megumi—

Yuuji breaks into a run.

He can't get his legs to move fast enough. He's the fastest boy on the track team and yet here he is now, stumbling over his own feet as he races across the grass. He runs into the school, following the sound of Shiro's howls. His heart is in his throat. His stomach is sick with fear.

The cursed energy is strong. This isn't a fly-head. It's not a minor thing, not a curse that popped up just now because the Inumaki tongue is gone. No, this is a *curse,* real and dangerous—and, judging from the bloody tang that Yuuji can taste when he opens his mouth, it's the same curse he failed to exorcise yesterday, when he was too preoccupied with not being late for his and Megumi's date.

If that decision yesterday is what leads to Megumi getting hurt now, then Yuuji will never forgive himself.

He can hear Megumi yelling, now. He's still a floor away, but in the empty school, any sound carries. There's the scrabbling of Kuro's claws on the floor as he races up the stairs. Shiro's barking, panicked and deafening. Megumi is shouting Shiro's name, telling him *stop, no, come back—*

Then Yuuji hears a crunch, and Shiro stops barking.

He's only one flight of stairs away now. The silence is worse than the noise from earlier. Yuuji throws himself up the stairs, his mouth full of the taste of blood, just in time to see Kuro race into the nearest classroom with his jaws wide open. Through the windows, Yuuji can see a skeletal shadow, all too fucking familiar.

When Yuuji gets to the door, his brain processes what he sees in three snapshots, like a piece of paper folded in thirds.

First: Kuro, frenzied, foaming at the mouth. He's got a chunk of purple flesh in his jaws, ripped clean from the curse's body.

Second: the curse. It's the same one from yesterday, thin and spindly, with its mouth hinged open like an angler fish. It's missing a huge piece of its torso, courtesy of Kuro.

Third: Megumi, with Shiro's corpse at his feet. Yuuji locks eyes with him from across the room, and then—

And then time starts again.

In every other universe, Megumi would be fine. In every other universe, he'd be able to exorcise the curse with a simple flick of his hands. In every other universe, Megumi would survive this, because in every other universe, Megumi is a sorcerer.

In this universe, he's just a boy.

Yuuji arrives just in time to see the curse bite his boyfriend's head off.

It's the worst death yet.

Yuuji waits and waits and waits, but the universe never comes to collect him.

After everything—after he's exorcised the curse and the ambulance has come, after Megumi disappears into the depths of the hospital, after Gojo is called and doesn't answer, after Tsumiki is called and *does* answer—after all that, Yuuji goes home.

He takes off his shoes. Doesn't turn on the light. He goes to his room, where the streetlight shining through the window gives him enough to see by. Slowly, with shaking hands, he reaches up and unbuttons his bloody uniform. He tosses it to the floor, then stares at himself in the mirror.

All of Megumi's past deaths are written on his skin for the world to see. The Hollow Purples from Gojo and Okkotsu, the scar from Jacob's Ladder, the imprint of Mahoraga's fist, countless wounds on the chest and stomach from nameless curses. Yuuji stares at his neck, which is mostly unmarked save for a starburst shape in the hollow of his throat, and he waits for the appearance of a jagged bite-shaped scar.

His throat remains blank. An hour ticks by, then another. Yuuji stares at his reflection until his vision blurs, but it never changes.

At first, he lets himself believe it's because Megumi's not dead. Yes, Yuuji had seen it happen himself, but—maybe. Maybe. Gojo probably pays for Megumi and Tsumiki to get the best healthcare around. Maybe, when the hospital calls again, Gojo will pick up, and he'll bring Ieiri with him. *Maybe.*

Then he gets the call from Tsumiki. When his phone lights up with the notification, the time on the screen burns itself into Yuuji's eyes. 9:49 PM.

Tsumiki is impressively steady about it. She tells him the news in a flat, numb voice, and she only wavers a little bit at the end. She ends the call without waiting for Yuuji to respond. It's just as well, because Yuuji doesn't think he ever would've responded.

Slowly, he sinks to the ground in front of the mirror. He curls his knees up to his chest and hugs them. He stares at the pale mess of his reflection, the scars of Megumi's deaths like inkstains in the dark. And he waits—waits for the slicing sensation, for the burning at his neck.

He waits all night. It never comes. For some awful, incomprehensible reason, it never comes.

Megumi is dead and the world moves on. A day passes, then two, then three. Yuuji is allowed to take time off school. His friends quietly forward him homework that they've already filled out with the answers—their own way of caring, of providing for him. The principal sends him an email with the school counsellor's contact. *As the sole witness to the accident,* the email reads, *the school extends their condolences, and would like to offer you the option of finishing the rest of the school year online—*

Yuuji slams his laptop shut and doesn't reply.

They say that it's a freak accident. A case of wrong place and wrong time. Megumi was staying behind after his club, and a ceiling fan fell with its blade pointing down in the worst way possible. The school gets closed down temporarily to review the building's safety code.

They find nothing. Of course they find nothing. There was nothing wrong with the building. There was nothing wrong with the fan.

Yuuji is quietly asked if he could be questioned about the incident. *Just for formality's sake,* they say. *You understand.*

He agrees numbly. When he gets to the police station—why are the police involved? There wasn't even anyone *there*—he finds Gojo pacing outside the door. He's swapped his blindfold for a pair of rectangular sunglasses, and they make eye contact. Yuuji dips his head in a half-bow, opens his mouth—

Gojo's face contorts with pure rage.

"You," he hisses, and Yuuji stumbles back, so shocked that he has no idea how to react. Gojo's never looked at him like that before. Gojo's never—he's never looked at Yuuji like he *hates* him, like he wants him dead, like—

The door opens. "Gojo-san? Itadori-san?" an officer calls. "In here, please."

So Gojo's here to be asked about Megumi too. Of course. He's his guardian, so it only makes sense.

The questions, as it turns out, are simple. Yuuji was the only person there—well, the only person still alive—when the ambulance arrived at the school, so the officer gently asks him about what happened. He gets out some bullshit story about how he only got there in time to see the fan blade cut through Megumi's nape. It fits with what the paramedics saw when they came in: Yuuji, kneeling on the classroom floor, screaming his heart out with Megumi's head clutched in his hands.

Just the head. Not the body. The body had been lying a few metres away, neatly severed at the neck.

The whole time Yuuji speaks, he can feel Gojo glowering at him. The officer seems to notice too, glancing uneasily at Gojo throughout the interview. Even with Gojo's gaze muted by the glasses, Yuuji can still feel those blue eyes burning a hole in the side of his head.

When he's done, the officer dismisses him with a soft smile and an apology for the inconvenience. She shoos him out, tells him that he's free to go, but...

Yuuji locks eyes with Gojo over her head. He knows, instinctively, that he should stay.

So he lingers outside the station. Gojo comes out a mere fifteen minutes after he does, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. He's practically radiating anger. Yuuji takes a step back.

Gojo looks down at him as he exits the station, and Yuuji's never felt the height difference between them as acutely as he does now. He's—he's not used to feeling *afraid* of Gojo. This is his sensei, his beloved teacher, the guy who buys him and the other students sweets and souvenirs that they didn't ask for—

"Itadori-kun," Gojo says coolly. "Let's walk and talk, shall we?"

...Well. Gojo was Yuuji's sensei in another life. A life that doesn't exist anymore. Yuuji shoves his face into his collar and follows along as Gojo starts walking down the street.

They turn the corner. Gojo rolls his shoulders.

"It wasn't a ceiling fan," he says. It's a statement, not a question.

"No," Yuuji agrees.

"Grade Three?"

Yuuji looses a breath. A test, to see if Yuuji is familiar with the grades, and to know if he's experienced enough to be able to recognise them on sight. "Two."

"Hm." Gojo tilts his head slightly in Yuuji's direction. Assessing. "And you exorcised it."

Yuuji hesitates. He *had* exorcised it, technically, with a scream caught in his throat, but he'd only gotten his hands on it after...

"It was Kuro, actually," he says. His voice comes out distant. "He got there just before me. He got a good bite in before he disappeared. That's why I was able to exorcise it."

"He *got there?"* Gojo's voice turns sharp. "He wasn't already with Megumi?"

Yuuji shakes his head. Gojo's mouth twists into an ugly expression, something furious and devastated all at once, before he smooths it out.

"That brat," he mutters. "I told him to always keep both dogs with him."

If Kuro and Shiro had both been there, then Megumi might have lived. No—he would have. Even untrained, Kuro and Shiro are formidable shikigami. Together, they could've taken down a Grade Two—maybe not without injuries, but they would've made sure that Megumi walked away alive. Loyal to the end.

But Kuro hadn't been there, because he was with Yuuji.

Gojo sighs. "Look, Itadori-kun," he says, reaching up to pinch the arm of his glasses. He flicks them down his nose, enough for Yuuji to see the bright blue glow of his eyes. "I really just want to ask you one thing: did you know?"

Yuuji stares at him. The words just—they don't compute. "...What?"

"Did you know that there was going to be a curse there?" Gojo asks, his voice brittle. "Were you in on it?"

Yuuji's mouth goes dry.

Gojo thinks that he—?

"No," he says. Spits, more like. The word bursts out of him, sharp and explosive. "No, I'd never—no. *No.* I didn't."

Gojo stares at him for a moment, unblinking. The foot traffic flows around them. Yuuji stares back, desperate. He—he *needs* Gojo to know that he didn't do it. He would never do it. Not to Megumi, god, just the thought of it makes him sick.

That time they met at the Fushiguro apartment—Gojo had said he trusted Yuuji. He'd suspected that there was something off, even then, but he'd still trusted Yuuji to not bring harm to Megumi or Tsumiki. And Yuuji had gone along with it, because he thought everything would be fine.

Well. Look at them now.

Finally, Gojo nods. "I see," he says, his voice flat. "So you didn't do it. Do you know who did?"

Now, that—that's a question that Yuuji can answer.

So he tells Gojo. He tells him about Kenjaku, about how he nearly cursed Tsumiki, about how he saw Yuuji that day last March. He tells Gojo about how he found Yorozu's tooth in the shed. He tells Gojo that he thinks Kenjaku did it out of—of some sick curiosity, probably.

The last time Kenjaku killed Megumi, he didn't have a reason other than the fact that he knew Megumi was important to Yuuji.

Then Yuuji tells Gojo about Shibuya.

"And you know this how?" Gojo asks sharply, so Yuuji—he doesn't even know what he says. It's a blur at this point. He babbles something about the future and his cursed technique—probably the same spiel he used in the last couple timelines, but honestly, Yuuji has no idea. He tells Gojo to find Mechamaru and ask him about it.

In every other timeline where Yuuji told Gojo the future, Gojo had listened intently. In this timeline, he questions Yuuji at every turn. He asks how he knows this, how he's sure, if his visions have ever been wrong. He grills Yuuji right there on the sidewalk, interrogating him about all the nooks and crannies of his nonexistent technique. And, the whole time he does it, he keeps his glasses down just enough for Yuuji to see his eyes.

In all honesty, it's terrifying. By the time Yuuji's done, his knees feel like jelly. Gojo stares at him for a few moments longer, letting the silence grate at Yuuji's ears, before he closes his eyes and heaves out a sigh.

"Okay," he says, sounding more like he's talking to himself than anyone else. "Okay. So—a sorcerer with stitches, you say?"

Yuuji nods. Gojo reaches up and runs a hand through his hair.

"Okay," he repeats, tilting his head back to look at the sky. "This sorcerer is responsible for Megumi's death. And he'll use Geto Suguru's body to catch me off-guard."

Yuuji nods again.

A muscle jumps in Gojo's jaw. "I see," he says, tilting his head back down. He reaches up and slides his glasses up his nose. "Well, then. Thanks very much for the information, Itadori-kun, but I think I can take it from here."

His voice is tense, fragile like glass. Yuuji knows a dismissal when he hears one. He bows to Gojo, mumbles out some kind of thank you and goodbye rolled into one, and stumbles off down the street.

When he reaches the corner, he looks back and finds Gojo still standing there in the same spot, unmoving as a stone. And, for a second, Yuuji thinks of Hachiko: the statue at Shibuya, the dog waiting for someone who would never return.

Yuuji's surprised when Gojo still invites him to the wake.

He knows Gojo doesn't like him. Knows that Gojo almost downright *hates* him. But he also knows that Megumi had—here Yuuji's mind stutters, like a record player going over a scratch—loved him.

Megumi loved him. Fushiguro Megumi had loved him. Megumi loved Yuuji, and Megumi is dead, and—and Gojo had loved Megumi too. Enough to overlook his own dislike of Yuuji for a day like this. Or maybe Tsumiki just strong-armed him into letting Yuuji come.

Either way, he's invited. Yuuji doesn't have a suit—he didn't wear one for his grandfather, since there was no real funeral. He goes out to a thrift shop and quietly asks an attendant to help him find something for a wake; the attendant, with an awful pitying look on his face, pays for the secondhand suit himself.

The wake isn't at the Fushiguro apartment. Tsumiki hasn't been at school since Megumi died, but she texts Yuuji the details. It's all the way in Kyoto, apparently—which is weird, considering that, as far as Yuuji knows, Megumi's never been connected to Kyoto in his entire life. He googles the address and finds that it's some kind of private manor. A historical site, owned by some rich unnamed family. Why Gojo thought it was a good place to hold Megumi's wake, Yuuji has no idea. Anyone who talked to Megumi for more than ten minutes would know that he'd much prefer a small, understated wake at the apartment he lived in with his sister.

Gojo-san will pay for your transport, Tsumiki tells him. Yuuji tries to protest, but she shoots him down. Apparently, this is Gojo's way of coping.

He travels to Kyoto alone. There's already a man waiting for him at the train station when he arrives, dressed in traditional garb and holding a sign with Yuuji's name on it.

"Itadori-san?" he checks, when Yuuji approaches him. Yuuji nods. "Satoru-sama told us to expect you. I'm to drive you to the Gojo estate."

The Gojo—?

Oh. So *that's* why they're in Kyoto.

Tsumiki and I owe our lives to the Gojo clan. This isn't a wake for Megumi—this is a wake for a member of the Gojo family. That huge private family-owned manor, which Megumi would've hated...that must be the Gojo manor.

"I see," Yuuji says faintly, and he lets the man usher him into a car that reeks of new leather.

The drive is long. It takes them to the outskirts of Kyoto, to the forests and greenery. Yuuji fiddles with the cuffs of his suit and focuses on not throwing up.

The Gojo estate is a beautiful, sprawling thing, fitting of a sorcerer clan that's been around for hundreds of years, but Yuuji doesn't get much of a chance to appreciate it. His driver—more of a handler, really—leads Yuuji straight through the doors and into a small room. Yuuji's breath catches when he steps through the door and sees a host of familiar faces: Tsumiki,

Maki, Inumaki, Okkotsu, Panda, Ieiri. They're all murmuring among themselves, but the chatter stops once Yuuji walks in.

"Yuuji-kun!" Tsumiki calls, breaking away from the others. She's wearing a black kimono, patterned with subtle but elaborate dark grey flowers, and her hair is loose. Her eyes are red. Yuuji tries to offer her his packet of condolence money—it's as much cash as he had on hand—but she pulls him into a hug instead. Yuuji's slightly ashamed at how desperately he melts into it.

Someone taps Yuuji on the shoulder, and he breaks away from Tsumiki to find Gojo looking down at him, his expression unreadable. He's dressed in a matching kimono to Tsumiki's, black with flowers; his blindfold is so dark Yuuji swears he can see his own reflection in it. "Glad to see you made it, Itadori-kun," he says coolly, plucking the condolence money packet from Yuuji's hand. Yuuji swallows and nods.

Gojo introduces Yuuji briefly as Megumi's boyfriend. Yuuji's half-surprised at the fact that he doesn't say anything else—nothing about Yuuji's cursed technique, nothing about how, years ago, Yuuji had been the one responsible for Megumi refusing the path of sorcery. None of the other students look at him with the same disdain that Gojo does. Kugisaki gives him a nod with no further recognition on her face. Maki simply glances at him, then looks away. Okkotsu is the only one who reacts verbally, giving Yuuji a tight smile and a, "Fushiguro-kun told us about you."

Gojo may hate Yuuji's guts in this timeline, but at the very least he is fair. Maybe it's out of respect for Megumi, so that his friends don't think he had terrible taste in men. Maybe Gojo just prefers to keep all his drama to himself. Either way, Yuuji's grateful for it. He doesn't think he could've handled being hated by Gojo *and* the other students.

When he sees Megumi in the casket, he almost breaks.

They've dressed him in a high-necked white kimono. It hides the death wound, the part where his head was severed. His eyes are closed. His hair has been carefully gelled to perfection, the way it never was in life. His mouth is a flat, pale line. Yuuji's heard it be said that dead people look like they're sleeping.

Megumi doesn't look like he's sleeping. Megumi looks like he's dead.

Yuuji spends most of the wake staring blankly at the wall above the casket. Death procedures are clearly different for sorcerers—or, in this case, someone with the potential to be a sorcerer—because there is no Buddhist priest reciting sutras. There's no incense, no offerings. Instead, an old woman shuffles into the room and leans over the casket, murmuring things to Megumi that Yuuji can't hear. It doesn't escape his notice that the inside of the casket is papered with seals—the same kind of seal used for cursed objects.

There's so few attendees that they can all stand in a single row, so that's what they do instead of everyone being seated. Ieiri stands at one end and Gojo stands at the other, the two of them sandwiching all the students and Yuuji between them.

Yuuji stands between Tsumiki and Maki. He feels like an intruder, standing in the section of the row that's clearly for family—Gojo is on Tsumiki's other side—but, before he can excuse himself to go stand next to Kugisaki or something, Tsumiki reaches out to grip his hand. Her palm is clammy, her fingers cold, but her grip is like an anchor. Yuuji swallows back a sob.

After the old woman is done, they're all given one last opportunity to look at him before the casket is closed. After this, Megumi's face will not see the light of day again. He'll be cremated. Yuuji won't be present for that part. It's family-only, and he's not family.

When they slide the casket lid shut, the only thing that stops Yuuji from crumbling is Tsumiki's hand.

Gojo comes up to them afterwards. He murmurs something to Tsumiki, who lets go of Yuuji, and then he reaches out and lays his hand on Yuuji's shoulder. His grip is bruisingly tight. He draws Yuuji away from the others, to the far corner of the room, and looks down at him.

"Itadori-kun," he says. "Enlighten me. When's your birthday?"

Yuuji stares at him. The question's so random, so unexpected, that his brain stalls for a second. "...Huh?"

"Your birthday," Gojo repeats. "When."

"Uh. March 20th...?"

Gojo grunts. "Thought so," he says, reaching into his sleeve. He pulls out a thin cardboard box, tied with a simple red ribbon, and shoves it in Yuuji's direction. There's an envelope tucked under the ribbon and a post-it note on the box that reads *March 20* in familiar handwriting. Gojo snatches the post-it note off and crumples it in his palm.

"I went through his room," Gojo says shortly. "Packing things up. You know how it is. Anyway, happy early birthday from him, I guess."

Oh.

Oh.

All the breath leaves Yuuji in one big rush. He takes the box with trembling hands. This is...this is...

Gojo clears his throat. "Itadori-kun," he begins, and he drags a hand down the side of his face. He looks, suddenly, so very old. "I know that Megumi...cared for you. And that you cared for him, too. But..."

He looks over, at where the other students are gathered. At where Tsumiki stands, speaking quietly to Maki.

"But I can't trust you," Gojo says. His voice is quiet but steely: absolutely unyielding. "You understand, right?"

He looks meaningfully from Tsumiki to Yuuji, and back again. Yuuji gets the message: *leave us alone. Don't come near us again.*

Do not touch my family again.

Yuuji swallows. Nods. Gojo gives him a tight smile.

"Great," he says dully. "Fantastic. Thanks for co-operating, Itadori-kun. I don't like threatening kids." He rubs a hand over his face. "That sorcerer you mentioned, with the stitches—look, if he comes after you again, then...I can try work something out, offer sanctuary at the school. But unless you want to be a sorcerer..." He spreads his hands. "There's not much I can do for you, Itadori-kun."

"It's okay," Yuuji says quietly. "I understand."

Gojo sucks in a breath through his teeth. "Thank you," he says, his voice strained, and he goes to rejoin the others. Yuuji watches as he steps up to the casket again, staring at the closed lid; Tsumiki breaks away from Maki and moves to his side. She steps towards Gojo, her hand reaching out for him, only to hit an invisible barrier.

She startles for a second, then relaxes. If she's known Gojo for a decade, then she must be used to his Infinity by now.

She presses again. Yuuji can see her fingertips turning white where the pressure is increased. Her hand doesn't get any closer to Gojo, and Gojo doesn't seem to notice.

"Gojo-san," Tsumiki says. It's quiet, but in the near-silence of the room, Yuuji can still hear her. "Please."

"Hm?" Gojo looks down at her. "Oh."

The barrier Tsumiki's been pushing against disappears, and she rests her hand on Gojo's arm. Together, the two of them stare down at Megumi's casket.

The wake ends soon after. The students leave first for Jujutsu Tech; Ieiri escorts them back. Then it's just Yuuji and Tsumiki and Gojo, and...well. Of the three of them, Yuuji's the one who doesn't belong.

Tsumiki presses the condolence money he brought back into his palm. Yuuji tries to protest, but she refuses to hear it. "We've got more money than we know what to do with," she says, folding Yuuji's fingers over the black packet. "Keep it, Yuuji-kun. And remember, you can always call me if you need to."

She gives him one last hug before a Gojo servant comes to gently but firmly guide Yuuji to the door. It's already growing dark outside. By the time Yuuji gets to Tokyo, it'll be well into the night.

He looks back, just once, to get one last glimpse of Tsumiki and Gojo.

They're both standing in front of Megumi's casket. Keeping vigil, as they will throughout the whole night, until the cremation and funeral tomorrow. Gojo's arm is resting on Tsumiki's shoulders, but it's stiff and awkward, too light—like he's forgotten how to touch.

Yuuji doesn't have a cursed technique like Gojo's. He doesn't have a literal wall separating him from the rest of the world. But, with the absence of Megumi by his side, he thinks he kind of knows how it feels.

Yuuji opens Megumi's birthday gift to him on the train ride back.

It's a cassette player. It's *the* cassette player: the same one his grandpa had. The same one he'd been eyeing that day in Akihabara, the one that he'd saved up for, the one that was sold to someone else. Now Yuuji knows: it was sold to Megumi.

He cries all the way back to Tokyo.

Yuuji,

You better be reading this in private like I asked, asshole. If you open this in public I'll punch you for real. You know I'm not joking.

I'm not very good with words, so don't expect anything crazy here. I'm writing this in September, so I might add to it later, but for now: just have a good birthday. I hope you like your present. You're a good boyfriend. I'm glad we met. I know you're smiling like an idiot right now, so stop that. It's embarrassing.

Happy sixteenth birthday.

Love, Megumi.

In the movies, people always do stuff like calling the dead person to hear their voicemail. Texting them like they're still there. Finding it hard to believe that they're gone.

Yuuji doesn't do that. For him, it's all too easy to believe that Megumi's gone. For him, the hard part is figuring out why *he's* not gone, too.

It's been a week. He should be dead. Megumi is dead, so Yuuji should be too. That's how things go. That's how this is meant to work. Yuuji needs to save Megumi, and he hasn't, not even once, so *why is he still here?*

"You got any ideas?" he asks Megumi's grave. The grave, predictably, is silent. *Fushiguro family grave,* it reads, but there's only one person buried here.

The cemetery is a small one. Quiet. It's tucked out of the way on the outskirts of Tokyo, a lengthy train ride from Yuuji's place. The only reason he even knows where Megumi was buried is Tsumiki. If it wasn't for her, the wake would've been the last time Yuuji saw him; he doesn't have the contacts of any of the students at Jujutsu Tech, and Gojo seems determined for them to pretend like the other doesn't exist. But, the day of the funeral, Tsumiki had texted him the cemetery location and told him that he was free to visit whenever he wanted.

Yuuji owes her a lot. She's been looking out for him ever since Megumi died, and he's done nothing to repay her. He should probably check up on her. Make sure she's doing well. He wonders if she's still living in the apartment, all alone, or if she's staying with Gojo. He wonders if she had to fight for Megumi to be buried under his own name in Tokyo instead of the Gojo family grave.

For a brief, insane moment, Yuuji considers telling Tsumiki about the Binding Vow.

She knows Megumi better than anyone else, after all. Yuuji's thought about it a thousand times, and the only answer he can come up with for why he's still alive is that it's got something to do with Megumi. When Yuuji went off and got himself killed by Jacob's Ladder, the Vow had still activated even though Megumi was alive—so, logically, that has to mean that Megumi's opinion matters.

So in this timeline, when Megumi is dead and Yuuji's still alive and kicking...

Does that mean that Megumi thinks Yuuji saved him? Would that be enough to satisfy the Vow? Would Tsumiki know what Megumi thought of him?

Yuuji only considers the idea for a few seconds before he throws it away. There's nothing he or Tsumiki can do about it now. Megumi is dead: that fact is irrevocable. Telling Tsumiki about all the other times he's died would do nothing but break her heart.

But still—it makes Yuuji think.

He leans forward, resting his hand on the cool stone of Megumi's grave. It's a gloomy day. The skies are grey like steel, heavy with rain that hasn't fallen yet.

Yuuji's got some measure of control over this Vow. He knows that for sure—after all, he's been able to decide what point in time he jumps back to.

The Binding Vow was *Yuuji's.* Megumi asked Yuuji to save him, but the Vow was all Yuuji's work. This is his. Everything that's happened to him, all of Megumi's deaths—they're *his.* So even if the Vow doesn't count this timeline as a failure, then...

Then can't Yuuji force it to send him back anyway?

"Hey," he croaks out. He's not sure who or what he's speaking to. Himself? The Vow? The universe? "This Vow is mine, right? So—so I can choose to do it again, right? *Right?"*

There's no answer, obviously. Yuuji tightens his grip on the gravestone.

"Please," he begs. He doesn't know who or what he's begging, only that he is. *"Please.* I can't—not like this. I can't live like this. Let me try again. I don't care what you think. I didn't save him—I still haven't saved him—"

Above his head, there's a rumble of thunder. A raindrop hits his hand and rolls down his arm, a thin line of cold on his skin.

Yuuji curls over himself and shudders. The rain starts falling in earnest, and it's so stupidly fitting that he almost laughs.

"Please," he says again, his voice raw and broken. "Please. I have to try again."

What did Ieiri tell him, a hundred lifetimes ago? In that building where they watched Gojo fight Sukuna? She'd said—oh, what was it—*if you believe something with enough conviction, then of course it'll become a Binding Vow.*

So all Yuuji has to do is believe?

Easy. No problem. He squeezes his eyes shut and he thinks: *please. I have to try again. I haven't saved him. I have to try again.* He imagines carving the words into himself, an unchangeable truth. He hasn't saved Megumi. He needs to try again.

When the first spark of pain comes, Yuuji welcomes it with open arms. When he feels a hot, burning feeling along his throat, like a molten knife being held to his neck, he cries like a goddamn baby.

He shuffles so that he's sitting with his back propped against the side of Megumi's grave. He curls his knees up to his chest and leans his head forward onto his arms, then reaches down to press his palm flat against the muddy earth. He's wracked by pain, by the feeling of his body being ripped apart at the seams, but he's relieved. This pain means that he gets another go. It means that he won't have to suffer through this life where Megumi is dead and Gojo hates him and Kugisaki doesn't know him. He gets another chance.

"Take me back to a time where I can save him," Yuuji says into his knees, his voice muffled. "Please. Any time, anywhere, just—*please."*

The rain grows worse. Somewhere far above his head, a bolt of lightning cracks the sky in two.

Yuuji wakes up on Christmas Eve.

Chapter End Notes

and we're right back where we started! wish yuuji luck.

- my friends who lurk on jjktwt have informed me that there is now stunning fanart of the jacob's ladder scene in chapter 2! thank you so much to the talented @bilateralym on twt, who i believe is allthingsunrelated on here. i can't believe this fic has art you have no idea how much i love it 😭😭 (though if you'd like me to remove the link, lmk in comments and i will!) unfortunately i don't have any fandom-related socmeds, but as a general rule, i would LOVE for you guys to comment and let me know if there's any art for this fic so that i can link it in the notes!

- this was the chapter i wrote the entire fic for. it's very dear to me. the fact that it's also the chapter where yuuji emotionally suffers the most and is chronically doomed by his own decisions is just a coincidence (no it's not. i love torturing yuuji). sorry yuuji...but i promise you will get your happy ending soon <3

- as a gojo-and-fushiguro-sibs enthusiast u guys will never know how badly i was tweaking out this chapter because it was in yuuji's pov and i couldn't write all the messy family angst.

- i considered making kenjaku a more major player in this by having him steal megumi's body. he would've used it to kill yuuji with kon and seal gojo in shibuya. i scrapped that idea because it didn't fit the themes of this fic, but man oh man did the idea of kenjaku-megumi possess me...i honestly might still write it as a deleted scene.

- the divine dogs are foreshadowing. imo, in canon, megumi is represented by the black dog/kuro and yuuji by the white dog/shiro (see: mahito's last moments). however, shiro also represents death, as the first shikigami to die and the only one with a visible impact on the other shikigami (shiro and yuuji both die at the detention centre, and the first time shiro 'returns' in kon is after yuuji is 'resurrected' at the goodwill event. kon's first appearance is also RIGHT before yuuji shows up to rescue megumi). in this chapter, kuro is always with yuuji and shiro is with megumi because they always want to be with each other...but shiro also foreshadows megumi's death, because of that very same love and connection with yuuji. man i love using the shikigami as symbolism

- slight edit after posting: the time tsumiki calls to inform yuuji of megumi's death is now 9:49. According to Japanese superstition, 9, 4, and 49 are all unlucky numbers. 9 and 4 can sound like the words for pain and death, so 49 = a painful death.

- if anyone has thoughts on the gojo and yuuji characterisation this chapter: please, i would love to hear them! i had a blast writing them, especially gojo.

- also, it's 4 chapters late, but you guys know how gojo killed megumi with hollow purple in chapter 1? just fyi, i always imagined that scene as repin's painting ivan the terrible and his son ivan. just in case anyone wanted a visual :)

- chapter title from david malouf's poem 'revolving days':
"That year I had nowhere to go, I fell in love—a mistake
of course, but it lasted and has lasted.
...
Revolving days. My heart
in my mouth again, I'm writing this for you, wherever
you are, whoever is staring into your blue eyes. It is me,
I'm still here."

Chapter 6: by the time you wake, i'll be brave

Chapter Notes

this chapter has spoilers for **the entire manga.**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yuuji's been here before.

He's 'been here before' with every timeline so far, but this is different. This—the sunlight slanting into his room, the faint chirping outside of stubborn birds who haven't realised the world has ended, the way his blanket is half-kicked off and hanging on his left leg—

Yuuji has *been here before.*

He throws himself out of bed and stumbles frantically to the mirror.

He doesn't have to take his shirt off to see the scar. It's right there, stark on his skin: a ring of teeth around his neck. An exact replica of the line where Megumi's head was bitten off his body, the line that had been covered up at the wake. Yuuji stares at it, presses his fingers to it, waits for *something* to go wrong, but...

But nothing does.

The mark remains. The grief remains. Yuuji leans forward until his forehead thunks against the cool mirror and tries to force his breathing to even out.

It worked. It *worked.* He begged for another go, and it worked. Megumi's most recent death has been carved on him like all the others, the latest in a long line of tally marks. Things didn't end there. Yuuji doesn't have to live out the rest of his life in that awful, awful world.

In this timeline, Megumi is still alive, and Yuuji can still try to save him.

Oh, god—*Yuuji can still save him.*

Yuuji presses a fist to his mouth and sinks to his knees on the bathroom floor. Everything is so *much:* the cold tile under his knees, the way his breath quivers in his chest, the four-pointed sting of his fingernails as he digs them involuntarily into his palm. Every breath he takes here, in his room at Jujutsu Tech, is another confirmation that Yuuji gets to try again.

It's Christmas Eve. Yuuji knows that for certain. He hasn't checked the date, hasn't confirmed it. There's nothing saying that today is Christmas Eve specifically, instead of just any day after Sukuna tore off Yuuji's left pinky and took Yuuji's beating heart with it. But Yuuji has woken up on this morning too many times to not recognise it. He knows the pattern of the

sunlight on the ceiling like the back of his hand. He knows the slight chill in the air, the bite of December. He knows today, and he knows how it ends.

Yuuji had already given up today as a lost cause. He's tried a dozen times to change the outcome, but it never worked. It doesn't matter who wins the fight, because Megumi will always lose.

But...

Take me back to a time where I can save him. That's what he said at Megumi's grave. He hadn't thought of anything, hadn't tried to reach a specific point in time. He'd just pressed his palms against the earth where Megumi was buried and begged any power that existed to let him have another chance. *Take me back to a time where I can save him,* he'd said, and then he'd woken up here.

So—he'd fucked up the first time, then. There was *something* he could've done, back on that very first relived Christmas Eve, to change Megumi's fate. Yuuji runs a hand through his hair and stares at the ground, trying to think.

Think. Come on, *think.* What else can he do? What else can he change? What did he not try? Yuuji tugs at his hair like it'll help his brain think faster, but no ideas come to mind.

He goes through the rest of the day in a daze. The clock ticks down to the start of Gojo and Sukuna's fight like a doomsday timer. As everyone gathers in the building where they'll watch the fight, Yuuji feels nauseous, sick to his stomach; Choso pulls him aside and asks if he's alright. Yuuji looks at him and tells him he's okay, just nerves, because—because how could he ever manage to explain what's happened? Where would he even start?

When Gojo steps into the room, Yuuji nearly throws up.

It's his sensei, his beloved mentor, but for a moment all Yuuji can see is the man who'd hated his guts for getting Megumi killed. Yuuji watches, his stomach churning, as Gojo moves towards them—

His eyes snap to Yuuji.

Yuuji's mouth goes dry as a desert. Gojo's eyes are paralysing; Yuuji feels like he's locked into place. Gojo's brow furrows, and his steps falter; beside him, the Kyoto principal—Gakuganji?—looks up at him questioningly.

"What?" the old man grunts. Gojo blinks, glancing away, and Yuuji can breathe again.

"Nothing, nothing," Gojo says. His tone is completely unreadable. "Just...need to sort some things out before we get started. Shoko, Yuuji-kun, could I borrow you two for a second?"

Yuuji blinks. In the corner, Ieiri slowly straightens her shoulders.

"If you somehow managed to get yourself injured," she starts, but Gojo waves her off.

"Nothing like that," he says breezily. "Now come on, chop chop, both of you. Just a second, I promise."

Yuuji lets himself be steered into the next room with Ieiri at his side. They share a bewildered look as Gojo lets go of them and steps back. He presses his palms flat together, his eyes darting between them, before he clears his throat and snaps his fingers.

"Shoko." He points at Yuuji. "Scan him."

Ieiri takes her cigarette out of her mouth. "Huh?"

"Scan him," Gojo repeats, his voice firm. "Or whatever it is you do to check for injuries. His cursed energy's off." He glances down at Yuuji, his mouth twisting. "Yuuji-kun, you feeling alright? Can't have you bowing out on us before the big finale, can we?"

Yuuji stares at him.

His cursed energy—of course. Gojo can see it with the Six Eyes. He'd called it tangled, the last time he and Yuuji talked about it. Yuuji wonders what it looks like. Is it like a weed, overgrown and choking? Barbed wire? An electrical cord? Or is it like an animal in a trap, dying slowly, unable to get itself out?

Ieiri steps forward. "I'm just going to do a quick examination with my cursed energy, Itadori-kun," she tells him, but Yuuji barely hears her through the static in his head. "I can't see the flow of cursed energy like this moron over here—I can only measure how it reacts to mine, so you'll have to tell me if you have anywhere in particular that you need me to look at."

She reaches up to press a hand to his temple, but Yuuji instinctively jerks away, his heart skipping a beat. Ieiri pauses.

"...Itadori-kun?"

Yuuji opens his mouth, but he can't find the words to answer her. He—why does he feel so *afraid?* He keeps looking at Gojo, who's staring at him with clear worry in his eyes, and—

In another life, another timeline, Gojo had looked down at Yuuji with those same eyes and made the worst mistake of his life.

I'm trusting you, yes? Don't let me down, Itadori-kun.

And Yuuji did. He *did.* He broke Gojo's trust in the worst way possible. He let Megumi die right in front of his eyes. He should've stayed away from the start. And now, as Gojo stares down at him, a single thought pierces through Yuuji's skull like lightning:

You should've let me die.

Gojo, Megumi, all of them—they should've just let Yuuji die. Back at the beginning, when no one knew him or cared about him, when Yuuji wasn't someone who Megumi would assign his Divine Dog to protect. They should've let him die. They should've cut his head off, just

like Megumi's: spinal vertebrae snapped apart, nerves and muscles severed, chunks of hair on the floor—

Ieiri's hand is on his shoulder. Yuuji can barely feel it. She's saying something, but her voice is distant, fuzzy, far away. All Yuuji can hear is the roaring of his own blood. His heart's beating faster, irregular, like it's trying to escape the cage of his chest. Yuuji reaches up to clutch at it and finds that his palms are clammy with cold sweat.

"—ji-kun," Gojo says, from somewhere above him. "Yuuji-kun. Helloooo? Anyone home?"

Yuuji blinks, and the world swims. For a second, Gojo isn't wearing his combat outfit—he's in a black kimono, matching Tsumiki, a black blindfold wrapped tight around his eyes. For a second, Gojo hates him. For a second, Megumi is dead.

"I'm sorry," Yuuji blurts out, and Gojo goes still.

"...Hah? Yuuji-kun, what—"

"I'm sorry," Yuuji repeats, the words a ragged gasp, and now that he's started he can't stop. He reaches out blindly and grabs a fistful of Gojo's haori, feels the fabric strain under his fingers. "Sensei, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm *sorry—"*

"Hey, hey, hey," Gojo says, sounding almost panicked. He grips Yuuji by the shoulders and pulls back to peer into his eyes. "Sorry for what, Yuuji-kun? Whatever it is, you're forgiven."

Yuuji shakes his head frantically. His voice lodges in his throat like a bone, like something he ate and can't cough back up. Gojo mutters something that Yuuji can't make out, running his hand up and down Yuuji's arm like he's soothing a caged animal.

"Alright, okay, just breathe," Gojo says, and Yuuji's *trying,* he *is,* but his body just won't obey him. Ever since birth, Yuuji's body has been a force of nature, and now Yuuji knows what it feels like to have that force turned back on him. This body isn't his anymore—it belongs to the inexplicable fear in his chest, the panic, the guilt.

He's shaking. His throat's closed itself off. His fingers are locked in place on Gojo's haori; he can't uncurl them even when he tries. Somewhere very far away, Gojo and Ieiri are whispering rapidly over his head.

"—don't know! He was fine yesterday, I talked to him and everything, I don't—"

"Satoru, look at him. You call that fine?"

"Obviously he's not fine *now.* What do I *do?"*

"Let him get it out. Itadori-kun? Itadori-kun, can you speak?"

Yuuji shakes his head again.

"Okay," Ieiri says, far more gently than she would usually speak. "I'm going to list a few things. Nod to tell me if you need them. Water?"

Yuuji shakes his head.

"Food? Air?"

More shakes.

"Time?"

Yuuji nearly laughs. Time—he's had enough of it. He's had all the time in the world. He's had more time than he deserves, and yet, at the end of it all, he's right back where he started. *Megumi* is right back where he started.

But he nods anyway, because he does still need more time. Ieiri pats his arm briefly.

"Just make sure he's breathing," she tells Gojo, who's still clutching Yuuji the way a cat person holds a small dog. Gojo makes a panicked sound in the back of his throat, a high-pitched 'urk', and—and Yuuji nearly bursts into tears, because Megumi makes that exact same sound when he's flustered. Megumi, who was Gojo's ward, who Gojo loved—who Gojo *loves,* present-tense. Megumi, who is still alive in this timeline. Megumi, who can still be saved, but not in any way that Yuuji knows.

If Gojo knew what Yuuji had done, he wouldn't be holding him like this. He wouldn't be making nonsense sounds in an attempt to calm Yuuji down. He wouldn't let Yuuji cling to him like a child. He wouldn't have told Yuuji, *whatever it is, you're forgiven.* If Gojo knew what Yuuji had done, he would be drawing Yuuji to the corner at Megumi's wake and quietly, firmly, asking him to stay away.

It feels like it takes forever for Yuuji's fingers to relax themselves, but Yuuji knows that it's probably just a few minutes. When his heart stops racing and his breath stops stuttering, he slowly pries his hands off Gojo's haori and steps back. He's too drained, too hollowed-out to feel embarrassed.

Gojo keeps him from going too far with a hand on his shoulder. "Woah there, Yuuji-kun," he says, a forced lightness to his voice. "Are you feeling okay?"

Yuuji reaches up to pat at his face and finds his eyes only slightly damp. "Yes, sensei," he croaks out. Gojo eyes him warily. "I'm just—overwhelmed. I think. With everything happening today."

Gojo pats his shoulder. "Of course, of course," he says, nodding awkwardly. "Um. So. You're all good?"

Yuuji breathes in a shuddering breath. "I'm all good."

At Gojo's side, Ieiri narrows her eyes. He's bluffing. They all know he's bluffing. But Yuuji won't tell, and Ieiri, doctor though she is, isn't the type to pry. And Gojo...well.

Gojo coughs awkwardly now, lifting his hand off Yuuji's shoulder. "As long as you're still feeling okay to fight Sukuna, if you have to," he says. His eyes bore into Yuuji's. "You *can* still fight, yes?"

Yuuji takes a deep breath.

Can he? Can he really? Can he do it again?

...It's a stupid question. Of course he can. He'll do it as many times as it takes.

"Yes, sensei," he tells Gojo, and Gojo nods.

"Good man," he says, reaching out to ruffle Yuuji's hair. "Now, about your cursed energy. Do you know what's wrong with it?"

Yuuji swallows. Nods.

"Can you still fight with it?"

Another nod.

"Good, good." Gojo tilts his head. "Anything you want to tell me, Yuuji-kun?"

Yes. Yes, there's a million things Yuuji wants to tell him. He wants to tell Gojo how today will end. He wants to tell him about how Sukuna will use Megumi's body to adapt to Gojo's technique. He wants to tell Gojo everything so that Gojo can step in and solve it all, but...

But that won't work. Yuuji knows that won't work. With Gojo and Sukuna's fight, there are only two outcomes: either Gojo wins, in which case Megumi dies—or Gojo loses, in which case everyone else dies.

Yuuji knows, with an awful certainty in his chest, which option he'd pick.

He knew it in the last timeline, when he let himself get too close to Megumi. He knew it in Shibuya when he traded Megumi for thousands of lives. He knew it all the way back in the original timeline, when he insisted on saving Megumi even if it meant sparing Sukuna.

So: "No, sensei," Yuuji says. He wonders if Gojo knows he's lying. "No. Nothing at all."

Gojo dies, and it's Yuuji's fault.

Nothing changes. It's exactly the same as he remembers it: every move, every attack, every dodge and feint and counter. If Yuuji had told Gojo what he knew, then Gojo would've survived. But Yuuji didn't, so Gojo doesn't, and the fight goes on.

The battlefield of Shinjuku's no place to be zoning out, but Yuuji finds himself fighting in a daze anyway. All he can think is: *it's happening again.* He thinks it when Kashimo dies, when Higuruma's trial goes wrong, when Okkotsu bursts onto the field and opens his Domain. *It's happening again. It's happening again.*

And then, under the influence of Okkotsu's Domain, Yuuji meets Megumi again.

"That's enough," Megumi says, and Yuuji's heart breaks.

It's broken a hundred times, but this time feels different. This time, he looks at Megumi and he knows: he loves him in every way possible. This time, he looks at Megumi and he sees a boy who he'd do anything to save.

"I've had enough," Megumi tells him. "Please."

For one fleeting, blinding moment, Yuuji considers asking Megumi to let him stay. He wonders if he could just—fall to his knees here, in the dark, and stay like that forever. At least, if that happened, he'd get to keep Megumi beside him. At least he wouldn't have to say goodbye. Even if Megumi never lets Yuuji approach him, even if they just spent the rest of eternity as two souls stuck in the coldest part of Megumi's innate Domain—even if that was the case, then at least they could be cold together. It would be worth it, Yuuji thinks, if they were just together.

But if Yuuji stays here, then *Megumi* will be the one saving *him,* and Yuuji can't accept that. Megumi's done far too much for him already, and Yuuji's done nothing but fail him in return. So he does what he's always done: he looks at Megumi, crumpled on the floor of his soul, and he promises to try again.

Okkotsu's Domain shatters, just like Yuuji remembers, and the fight begins anew.

Sukuna takes them out one by one: Maki, Kusakabe, Okkotsu's foreign allies. Yuuji's memory of this part of the fight is hazy; there had been too many people, too many attacks. But when Sukuna puts his hands together, grinning, Yuuji recognises the sign immediately.

His body moves on instinct. Not *Yuuji's* instinct, but Kusakabe's instinct, hammered into Yuuji's body through their switch training. His legs sweep out around him. His hands curl into fists. His cursed energy shapes itself into a circle around him, a protective dome: Simple Domain.

Yuuji remembers this. He remembers Sukuna's incomplete Domain. Malevolent Shrine attacks relentlessly at the edges of his Simple Domain, but Yuuji grits his teeth. It hadn't lasted long the first time. All he needs to do is bear it. Just bear it, bear it, bear it, *bear it—*

His Simple Domain is torn apart, but Yuuji only feels the slashes of Malevolent Shrine for a split second before they stop. His leg is sliced off below the knee, but that doesn't matter—he regrows it before he hits the ground.

"Yuuji!"

Choso.

Yuuji looks around wildly. Choso's there, running towards him, his robes flapping in the wind. Their eyes meet across the rubble, and Yuuji—

Yuuji knows what will happen next. After the incomplete Domain, Sukuna had—he had—

"Furnace," Sukuna murmurs, and Yuuji's heart stops. "Open."

Sukuna had done *this.*

It happens in a split second. Yuuji feels the flare of heat at his back, sees how Choso's eyes widen. There's an explosion of crimson at Choso's heels, and then he's right in front of Yuuji's eyes, his hand outstretched, and...and...

The first time this happened, Yuuji had protested. He'd demanded to know what Choso was doing. He hadn't been able to believe it. No—he just didn't want to. He didn't want to think that his big brother was going to die, right here and right now, just to keep Yuuji alive for a few seconds longer.

Now, though, he knows exactly what Choso's doing. As a dome of blood closes around him, shielding him from Sukuna's flames, Yuuji opens his mouth and finds that his voice has failed him. As Choso smiles and tells him, *your big brother tends to do things instinctively* and *sorry—I'm leaving you alone again* and *thank you for being my little brother,* all Yuuji can do is stare at him. He thinks he's crying, but even here, protected by the last of Choso's blood, the heat is bad enough to make the tears evaporate almost instantly.

"Thank you," he manages to croak out, right at the very end. He prays that Choso hears him.

When the dome of blood dissolves, Yuuji is witness to the aftermath of a bomb.

The ground is scorched. The air is steam. It's so hot that it hurts to breathe. Yuuji stares out and sees no one. Nothing.

Well—no one except for *him.*

Sukuna emerges from the steam like the god he was once worshipped as. And Yuuji hates him—he *hates* him, with an intensity that shakes him right down to the bones. Sukuna, who destroys entire cities for no reason other than the fact that they were there—Sukuna, who thinks that people's lives can be measured—Sukuna, who kills simply because he didn't find someone *interesting* enough...

Yuuji hates him. Truly, he hates him. Even as Todo steps onto the battlefield, all Yuuji can feel is a burning in his gut. Even as Todo activates his technique, swapping the three of them around like a magician swaps cards, Yuuji's focus narrows entirely to hitting Sukuna where it hurts. He hates Sukuna. He hates him, hates him, *hates him—*

When Yuuji hits Sukuna with a Black Flash, he doesn't just stop at the skin. He looks Sukuna in the eye—looks at his face, which had once been Megumi's—and the rage that fills him is so intense, so white-hot, that he lets out a roar and punches his hand straight into Sukuna's chest.

It's warm. Hotter than normal blood. Yuuji snarls and digs his fingers in deeper, watching Sukuna choke. This won't kill Megumi—Sukuna's too strong for that—but it *will* hurt Sukuna, and for the first time since this fight started, Yuuji wants nothing more than to do that. He wants to crush Sukuna's heart.

Then he looks up, and he sees Sukuna's crossed fingers.

He's nothing but a filthy fucking thief. First Megumi's body, and now Gojo's hand sign—Gojo's hand sign, because what Sukuna's about to do is—

"Domain Expansion," Sukuna says coolly, and nothing happens.

Yuuji pants out a breath. He watches as Sukuna's eyes snap sideways, then widen. He follows Sukuna's gaze to where a figure emerges from the steam, and...and...

White hair. Blue eyes. Yuuji knows that face. He—

In his moment of distraction, Sukuna punches him across the face. Pain explodes through Yuuji's jaw, but it's just that: pain. He goes tumbling over the scorched ground, gritting his teeth, listening as Sukuna barks out an incredulous laugh.

"I didn't think you were capable of going this far, Okkotsu Yuuta!" he roars, and—

Yuuji's blood runs cold.

This. This, right now—*this* is the moment where Megumi died, in that very first timeline. This is the moment where Okkotsu raised his hand and fired Hollow Purple through Sukuna's stomach. Yuuji sees it happen again like it's in slow motion. He sees Okkotsu's hand lift, sees the fingers curl into the familiar hand sign.

Yuuji lurches forward. His mouth hinges open, and his hoarse voice tumbles out. "Okkotsu—"

For a moment, those stolen blue eyes flicker in Yuuji's direction.

A moment is all Sukuna needs. He brings his own hand up in his modified sign for Malevolent Shrine, and Okkotsu—

He changes track. He was going for Hollow Purple. Yuuji *knows* he was going for Hollow Purple. But, as Sukuna opens his mouth, Okkotsu's fingers quickly switch to the sign for Infinite Void instead.

They say it in sync, Okkotsu and Sukuna, the exact same words at the exact same time: *"Domain Expansion."*

The sheer force of it blows Yuuji back. Sukuna's Domain is barrierless, but Okkotsu's—*Gojo's*—isn't. Yuuji can only stare from the outside as a black shell forms, closing off Okkotsu and Sukuna from the rest of the world.

This—this is new.

This is *new.*

They've moved past the point where Megumi died in the original timeline. This didn't happen the first time. It didn't happen in *any* of the timelines. This is completely new, something that

Yuuji has never seen before, and...

And Megumi is still alive.

Yuuji's heart leaps up into his throat. Maybe. *Maybe.* Maybe this time—maybe, just maybe, this time he can do it.

Someone grabs the back of his collar and heaves him to his feet—Todo. Yuuji coughs, splattering the concrete in front of him with blood, then wipes it with the back of his hand.

"Three minutes, yes?" Todo says, his eyes fixed on the hovering black sphere of Okkotsu and Sukuna's combined Domains. Yuuji nods mutely. "Then we must prepare, brother. When that barrier bursts..."

Yuuji nods again. He knows what Todo's asking for: blind, unconditional trust. When that barrier breaks—and it *will* break—Yuuji will start attacking. He'll just start throwing punches. He'll focus on hitting the boundary between Sukuna and Megumi's souls and nothing else. Todo will do the rest of the work.

When Okkotsu's Domain explodes, Yuuji is ready.

Okkotsu collapses immediately. Alive or dead, Yuuji doesn't know, and he has no time to check. He feels like he's been electrified, a new wave of energy being shocked into his system. This is new. This is *new.* This is new, and Megumi hasn't died yet.

This timeline could be the one.

The thought of it—of finally getting to see Megumi again at the end of all this—makes Yuuji strong enough to throw Sukuna through a wall. It's a good old-fashioned brawl: they throw each other through the buildings of Shinjuku, punching and pummelling and kicking as hard as they can. Yuuji lands a soul-splitting Dismantle point-blank and watches, viciously satisfied, as Sukuna hurls up three of his own fingers before shoving them back in his mouth.

When Todo brings the Angel onto the field, and Jacob's Ladder blasts down onto them, Yuuji watches Sukuna climb the pillar of light and thinks: *oh no you fucking don't.*

Not now. Not when he's *this close* to saving Megumi. Yuuji grits his teeth and dives into the light after Sukuna, scrabbling at pieces of debris to climb his way up. It burns, but Yuuji's felt Jacob's Ladder at its fullest power before, and this is nothing compared to that.

He doesn't care if his body gives out. He'll make it keep going for as long as he needs it to—for as long as *Megumi* needs it to. It's just pain. It's just exhaustion. Yuuji can do it. He *can.* As Todo throws himself in front of Kurusu to save her from a Black Flash, Yuuji bares his teeth and throws himself at Sukuna as hard as he can.

He punches Sukuna across the face with all the cursed energy he can muster. Together, they fall out of Jacob's Ladder, hurtling towards the earth, but Yuuji's not done yet.

All of his senses kick into overdrive. His mouth tastes like blood. His right eye's out of commission. But Yuuji's head is startlingly quiet, save for a single thought: *come on.*

Come on. Come *on.* Come on come on *come on*—punch here. Dodge there. Duck beneath that arm. Hit Sukuna there, *there,* hit him hard enough to hurt. Come on, Yuuji, *come on*—land this next hit and you'll save him. Avoid that punch and you'll save him. Stay alive and you'll save him. Strike the line between their souls and *you'll save him.*

The realisation comes to him like the sun peeking out over the horizon. Yuuji needs to keep hitting Sukuna with soul-splitting Dismantles. He needs to make contact. There's one way to make sure that happens, and it's something that Sukuna will never see coming.

Yuuji breathes in. Breathes out. Puts his hands together in the sign that had come naturally to him the first time he tried it after swapping with Kusakabe.

He looks Sukuna dead in the eye and says, "Domain Expansion."

Yuuji puts his hand up to shield his eyes from the sun.

He's not sure if he did the Domain right. For one thing, this isn't the body he was fighting with—that body had a busted eye, a billion small wounds, and less than ten fingers. Next to him, Sukuna is much the same: he's in a carbon copy of Yuuji's body, no extra limbs or mouth in sight. Yuuji knows that he put up a barrier—he can feel it, a domed shell—but he's not entirely sure if this is really a *Domain,* or if it's some weird mix of his, Sukuna's, and Megumi's souls.

For one thing, he'd thought that Domains were meant to look like fixed locations. This one, though...

They'd started in a train station with no trains in sight. Yuuji had started walking. Sukuna, silently, had followed. Now they're here, on a slow-moving escalator, watching the sunny sky slowly come into view.

"I've experienced this before," Sukuna says abruptly. Yuuji glances over to look at him and finds him staring straight ahead. "The rare phenomenon of connecting with a sorcerer in the height of battle. I thought it was a side effect of cursed energy born from humans, but..."

His eyes slide sharply sideways, meeting Yuuji's gaze.

"This is different," he says, his lip curling derisively. "What is this? Your Domain?"

"Shut it," Yuuji snaps, looking away. "I did this a little frantically, okay? I don't really get it either." They step off the escalator, their footsteps in sync. "I wanted some time to talk to you. Just indulge me for a sec."

Sukuna, inexplicably, does. He follows Yuuji out into the sun, where Yuuji sees a familiar statue by the station and nearly laughs. He knows where they are, now: the town where he

lived before Sendai. Why his Domain took them here, of all places, he's not entirely sure, but...

Well. For what he wants to show Sukuna, it'll work nicely.

They meander through the town. It looks the way it did the last time Yuuji saw it, when he went back for the funeral of his grandfather's friend. In other words, it looks different to how it did when he lived in it. The streets are empty. The buildings are grey and run-down. Yuuji looks around and feels nostalgia like an ache in his throat.

He shows Sukuna the park where he lost his slime once. He calls the flowers morning glories; Sukuna corrects him. They're hydrangeas, apparently. When Yuuji asks, Sukuna says he knows flowers from Megumi's memories. The mention of Megumi is a knife between Yuuji's ribs, but he doesn't say anything. Instead, he watches Sukuna carefully, watches how his eyes shift and glance away, and he thinks: *liar*.

They keep walking.

Yuuji tells Sukuna about everything mundane. He shows him all his old haunts, all the places that intrigued a little kid with no friends like him. There were no other children his age in the town; every place that Yuuji shows Sukuna is a place where he would hang out alone.

They catch crayfish. They go out to the edge of town where it's greener, and Yuuji laments the loss of the grasshoppers. They lean against the railing at the edge of field, watching white clouds drift across the sky.

"...Is this going anywhere?" Sukuna asks gruffly. Yuuji waves a hand.

"Just hold on," he tells him. From that question alone, he knows that Sukuna doesn't understand what Yuuji's trying to show him. "I still have some places I wanna go."

He shows Sukuna the horses. The farm. The soft serve place where he once ate so much that he threw up. They come across an archery range, and Sukuna doesn't protest when Yuuji says they should try it out. Yuuji watches how he nocks the arrow, how he draws his arm back without flinching and hits a bulls-eye on the target, and wonders how long it's been since Sukuna used a weapon without the intent to kill.

They reach the silo where the snow sculptures used to be. Yuuji would stand here for hours as a kid, admiring them. He tells Sukuna about it—about shovelling snow until his hands grew numb, about drinking piping hot sweet milk tea afterwards and ignoring his grandpa's disgusted face, about how he would hear bells at night, and how it convinced him Santa was real, only for him to realise it was the chains on the snow tires.

"Alright," Sukuna says, as they come to a stop in the middle of the woods. It's a beautiful place to stop, Yuuji will give him that. "I've had enough."

"Okay, okay," Yuuji acquiesces. Above them, the sunlight filters through the canopy in little patches. "I think I showed you pretty much everything I wanted to."

"Your blathering is disgusting," Sukuna says coolly, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Say what you want to say."

Yuuji looks down at the ground. There are leaves there, dead and withered, trampled under his careless feet.

He thinks of Megumi, like he always does.

What he says now—he hopes that Megumi can hear him.

"You know," he starts, feeling Sukuna's eyes burning on him, "up until recently, I thought I should just live to fulfill my role as I understood it."

Things had been so easy back then. *Save as many people as you can:* that was his role. A cog in the machine to kill curses. It was something he could either succeed or fail at, an easy way to tell if he was doing things right.

But then his role shifted. Then his role wasn't *save people,* but *save Megumi.* And now Yuuji thinks he knows: things can never be that simple.

"I thought if I died like that," he says, "I could at least consider it a proper death. But now...I feel like that's not entirely right."

When Yuuji let himself die by Jacob's Ladder, it would've been a proper death by his own standards. He'd saved Megumi, after all. He'd helped kill Sukuna. He'd fulfilled his role. He'd saved someone.

And yet—it didn't work.

He hadn't saved Megumi because he hadn't saved himself, and Megumi loved him enough for that to make a difference. Megumi loved him. Megumi *loves* him. That connection alone, the fact that Yuuji had done something, somewhere, to make Megumi care for him—that had been enough to change everything. Just being loved had changed everything.

Nanami, Kugisaki, Choso—being loved has always changed everything.

"Walking the dog, raising a family, any role like that is fine," Yuuji continues. "Even if you don't have that, as long as you eat, shit, and sleep...even if you're stuck in bed sick, even if you spent your life with no connections and nothing remains of you..."

The town that they've just walked through looks the way it does because Yuuji remembers it like this. He remembers it like this because the last time he came here, it looked like this. And the last time he came here, it was on behalf of a man he didn't know: just his grandfather's old friend, with no further connection than that. And yet, because of that friend, the town that Yuuji shows Sukuna now is a version that he never lived in. Again: love, like a domino effect, falling from Yuuji's grandfather to him.

"...More than the memories in your image, it's in the little pieces that remain, drifting off, where the value of a life lies," Yuuji says. Sukuna hasn't moved once during this entire spiel. He watches, still unmoving, as Yuuji sits down on a nearby rock.

"It never had anything to do with the way people die," Yuuji confesses. "I just couldn't ever forgive those who acted like that value didn't exist." He looks up and finds Sukuna looking at him, all four eyes trained on Yuuji's face.

"Sukuna," he says honestly. "I loathe you."

What's that famous quote? *The opposite of love is indifference.* That's Sukuna: indifferent. He doesn't care. He doesn't look at other people as being worth anything beyond what they can offer him. And for that, Yuuji hates him, but he also...kind of, sort of...

...he feels bad for him.

"Humans aren't tools," Yuuji tells him. "We aren't born with any set role. Which is to say: I don't know. I don't know if humans are fundamentally good or evil. I could be doing the wrong thing here, but..." He looks down at his feet. "I thought I should at least let you see the humanity of someone other than yourself. Of someone you see no value in."

Sukuna is silent for a long moment. He's been surprisingly respectful this whole time, keeping quiet and letting Yuuji ramble on. Then he sighs, a quiet sound, and lifts his chin.

"I don't feel a thing," he says. He doesn't say it harshly—he just states it, because it's a fact. Yuuji has played all his cards, and Sukuna doesn't care. "I understand everything you're saying, brat. But...it stirs no emotion within me."

He turns away from Yuuji, gazing instead past the hills and down to where the buildings lie. "Just as you felt when you saw how quiet this town became," he says. "You expected it. I feel absolutely nothing."

Yuuji blows out a breath. "No dice, huh?" he murmurs. "I figured."

It's strange: he feels disappointed.

He's got no right to. He never really expected that Sukuna would have some magical change of heart just by listening to all of Yuuji's stupid stories. But still, at the very least, he'd hoped that maybe Sukuna would feel bad about killing him. Maybe he'd stop to think about the fact that he was taking a life—a life that, no matter how useless or weak, had mattered for the simple fact of existing.

"Suffice to say, I'm dumbfounded by your cowardice," Sukuna says now. Yuuji hunches over and crosses his arms, burying his face in his collar. *Cowardice?* "Your rage towards me, your hatred...is this all that it amounted to?"

Yuuji should've known he wouldn't understand. *Is this all,* he said, like this is something stupid, something small. *Is this all*—this is everything. This, right here, this weird half-Domain that looks like a town that's changed so much that Yuuji will never return to the place he knew again—for someone like Sukuna, this is the worst thing that he could think of.

Sukuna twitches.

"Wait," he says slowly. Yuuji watches as he turns around. Ah—he's finally getting it. "You couldn't possibly be..."

Yuuji could. Yuuji *is*.

"Are you...*pitying* me?"

He says it like it's impossible. Like there's nothing about him to pity. Yuuji knew he would see it like this—he knew, he *knew*—but he'd still hoped, like an idiot, that Sukuna would somehow understand.

"Is this your way of showing compassion?" Sukuna demands. His eyes are wide and disbelieving. Yuuji looks at him, at the face that looks exactly like his own, and decides to tell him the truth.

"Exactly," he says, meeting Sukuna's gaze. They stare at each other, and Yuuji doesn't know if he's looking at Sukuna's eyes or at the reflection of his own. "Sukuna...I can kill you. Release Megumi. Return to my body, and I'll spare your life."

He means it. He means it all the way down to his bones. If it will save Megumi, then he'll take Sukuna as his burden again. They'll try again, him and Sukuna—there are no secrets between them now.

Sukuna stares at him for a moment. Then, like an animal, like a beast, like the monster that he says he is, he curls his lip back and bares his teeth. Beneath Yuuji's feet, the ground starts to shake.

"What a severe misconception," Sukuna snarls, and Yuuji's heart sinks. Around them, the woods shake and splinter like a sheet of glass. Someone else is rearranging the Domain—Sukuna? "I won't just mince you to bits, brat. Right in front of your eyes, I'll slaughter each and every human that you think so valuable."

That's a no, then.

Oh, well, Yuuji thinks, as the Domain fractures and splits Sukuna's furious face in two. *At least I tried.*

"That's enough," Megumi says.

Yuuji blinks.

He's sitting in Megumi's living room—the living room in the apartment. The same living room that they ate in, kissed in, watched movies in, fell asleep in. He's at the table, his knees folded beneath him, legs pressed to the floor. The window is open. Sunlight slants into the room, warm and syrupy. Yuuji can see dust motes floating in it. The curtains drift in a light

breeze. Empty clotheshangers, hooked on a rack attached to the window, clack quietly against each other.

Megumi sits across from him. He's dressed in his home clothes, a baggy black shirt and loose pants. His hands are wrapped around a ceramic cup, half-full with steaming tea. Yuuji looks down and finds an empty cup of his own. There's a teapot on the table. Yuuji doesn't reach for it.

Megumi opens his mouth.

"I wanted to create a world," he says quietly, "where Tsumiki wouldn't have to suffer needlessly."

Instinctively, Yuuji looks to the door, expecting Tsumiki to come in at any moment and toe off her shoes. But the door stays closed. The rest of the apartment is a haze, shifting slightly; a blur of memory. Tsumiki doesn't come walking down the hall. Her voice doesn't echo from the other room. It's just Yuuji and Megumi, together at the table.

"Or, at the very least," Megumi says, "I wanted to preserve our fragile life as much as I could."

He tilts his head back, looking out the window. Yuuji follows his gaze and sees a sky streaked with orange and pink. Sunset.

Our fragile life. Megumi used those same words in their last timeline together. *I always thought we had a fragile life. I'm glad I get to share it with you.*

As Megumi speaks, Yuuji can't help but remember.

"Eating meals cooked out of habit..."

The kitchen in the Fushiguro apartment, with that damn island that Yuuji kept clipping himself on. Reaching over Megumi's head for the sauces, even though Megumi was taller. Twisting around to get Megumi to taste the food first, hot from the stove, always wanting to know what he thought.

"...watching our laundry dry in the sun..."

Hang it like this. No, like this. It'll dry faster—

No it won't, dumbass, you folded it wrong.

Hey! I lived alone for years! Tsumiki-nee-chan's spoiled you, man...

We're dating. Don't call me man.

Sorry, sorry. A laugh bubbling out of Yuuji's throat, unavoidable. Pressing a kiss to the corner of Megumi's beloved mouth, feeling it quirk upwards beneath his lips. *Does this make up for it?*

"...seeing Tsumiki off as she walked side-by-side with someone like you..."

Tsumiki dressed in all black, her hair loose, her eyes red and puffy from crying. Tsumiki by his side, the only person at the wake who knew him and didn't hate him. Tsumiki gripping his hand, her fingers clammy, the two of them left behind as they watched the casket lid slide shut.

"...that would've been true happiness to me," Megumi finishes quietly, his eyes downcast. "But I've had enough."

Yuuji's heard him say it a dozen times. More than a dozen. *Enough, Itadori. That's enough.* Yuuji's ignored him up until now, refusing to accept a world where he wasn't reaching desperately for Megumi's hand, but...

But, suddenly, all he can think of is how he'd lived after Megumi died. In the last timeline, the one where they weren't sorcerers—Yuuji had lived. Yuuji had survived even after Megumi's death. He'd known what that meant: in Megumi's eyes, Yuuji had already saved him.

Of course. *Of course.* They'd lived Megumi's ideal life. He'd died young, but he still lived well—the universe never came to collect Yuuji because there was no failure to collect him for. It didn't kill him until he asked for it.

It was Yuuji who got them into this situation again. It was Yuuji who begged for another go, who couldn't stand to live without Megumi. It's Yuuji who inflicted this on Megumi.

Something deep inside Yuuji cracks open: a flower vase spilling its water.

Maybe it's *always* been Yuuji inflicting this on Megumi.

This whole time, from the very beginning, Megumi has been telling Yuuji that he's had enough. He wants out. He wants to rest. And Yuuji's refused him that—he's clung to Megumi with both hands, tied them together as tight as he can, rewritten their lives dozens of times to try and save him...

And none of it worked.

Maybe—maybe it *won't* work. Maybe it will never work.

I've had enough, Megumi says, and maybe the kindest thing Yuuji can do is just...listen to him.

He finds himself speaking on instinct.

"Early on, when my grandpa first got sick with lung cancer," he starts, watching Megumi's fingers twitch on the table, "he was offered a rough treatment that would've come with strong side effects. He turned it down."

Yuuji still remembers it: sitting at the kitchen table with only one light turned on, the letter from the hospital thrown down on the counter. His grandfather huffing and puffing as he

cooked up dinner, periodically stopping to cough. Yuuji, banned from helping for the night—his grandpa had wanted to feel independent—had watched him, his chin in his hands, feeling both devastated and strangely distant.

Jii-chan, maybe you should—

Tch! His grandfather flipped the pan, and something sizzled. *It's not worth it. Why would I want to go through that? Just to live another ten years with more problems? Better to die peacefully than live in pain.*

"Maybe he thought his body was strong enough even without the treatment," Yuuji muses. Megumi is watching him silently. The table between them feels like it could be the width of either a strand of hair or the Pacific Ocean. "Every so often I'd hear about euthanasia, but that didn't feel right. It felt like someone else's choice."

Eighth grade. A warm afternoon. Yuuji had slid open the door of his grandfather's hospital ward, his brow furrowed. *The nurse mentioned euthanasia? Jii-chan—*

His grandpa had waved a dismissive hand from the hospital bed. *Don't bother. Did you bring flowers again? You brat, I told you not to waste money.*

For two and a half years, Yuuji's grandfather had been sick with cancer. For the majority of that time, he was bedridden. Everyone said that Yuuji had taken it so well—that he'd become so mature so quickly, been able to take on the task of being independent with no problem. But the truth of it—

The truth of it was that Yuuji hadn't let himself linger long enough to feel the hurt.

"Deep down," he admits, "I'd always felt distant. Unrelated. I figured it must suck for them, but I'd be fine. But ever since coming to Jujutsu Tech..."

Blinking back to consciousness and finding himself on the edge of a crater in Shibuya. Falling to his knees and clawing at the ground until the gravel made his fingers bleed.

Die. Die. Die. Only me. Die, right now. Right now.

Then Nanami—and Kugisaki—and then, just this morning, hadn't Yuuji thought it would be better if he died? Hadn't he wanted to get down on the ground with Megumi and stay there with him forever?

"I've been flooded with all these awful thoughts," Yuuji confesses. Megumi hunches his shoulders a little. "And when I think about this lasting forever..."

After Shibuya, he'd wanted to die. Kill curses, then die—that was it. That was all. If it hadn't been for Megumi, extending a hand to him...

Start by saving me, Itadori—it was like taking a lit match to the wet firewood of Yuuji's soul and somehow, incredibly, still making it catch alight. Megumi had worked a miracle. If Yuuji can't work that same miracle now...if Megumi doesn't *want* him to work that miracle...

Is it right, for Yuuji to force him? To walk back into a world where Megumi's sister and mentor are dead and look back over his shoulder to make sure that Megumi is following him?

"...I can empathise with my grandpa," Yuuji finishes. "And anyone else in a helpless situation. That's why..."

He lifts his gaze to meet Megumi's across the table.

"I can't—" His voice breaks. He clears his throat and tries again. "I can't tell you to keep living."

Megumi's eyes widen, just a bit. His eyes really are beautiful, Yuuji thinks distantly. *He* is beautiful. Even like this, as they sit on either end of a table that doesn't exist, all Yuuji can feel for him is love.

Somewhere in the distance, there's a boom of power as Sukuna activates Hollow Wicker Basket. In front of Yuuji, the vision of Megumi cracks and shatters like glass.

But even as Sukuna advances—even as Yuuji prepares to fight—he only thinks of one thing.

It's okay. I heard you, Megumi. You've had enough.

If Megumi wants to come back, then Yuuji will be right here waiting for him. If Megumi wants to leave, then Yuuji will follow him as far as he can before he has to wave him off. But, either way, the decision is out of his hands.

It doesn't matter what Megumi chooses. He doesn't have to say or do or be anything. Yuuji will love him all the same.

Sukuna lunges for him. Yuuji blinks. Breathes out. Thinks of Megumi sitting across from him in the sunlight, the wind in his hair, a cup of his favourite tea fitted snugly between his hands. Safe. Alive. And above all, happy.

Yuuji meets Sukuna head-on.

Yuuji's Domain, he thinks, isn't a proper Domain at all. It's some kind of limbo for their souls, carved up between the three of them: Yuuji, Sukuna, and Megumi. Yuuji's laid the base, the town in which everything happens. Sukuna and Megumi each have their own pull over it. On Yuuji's right, there's Sukuna in his true form, four-armed and furious. That half of Yuuji's soul is squinting out of a bloodied eye, brawling with Sukuna on the grass as geese fly overhead. And on Yuuji's left...

On Yuuji's left, there's Megumi.

As the right half of him wrestles with Sukuna, *this* half of Yuuji finds himself stumbling into an alleyway. He's unharmed, unhurt. No blood. No busted eye. He doesn't even have his undereye scars from Sukuna. He's completely untouched, and he thinks he knows why.

It takes a second for him to place the rundown walls, the weeds growing out of the concrete, the sudden inexplicable gold light of a setting sun. He's been here before. He recognises it. His heart pangs in his chest. And there, in front of him, is a boy. He turns around to look at Yuuji, squinting in the sun, and...

And Yuuji realises: in all the lifetimes Yuuji's lived, he has never—not once—told Megumi the truth.

He's told Gojo loads of times. He told Tsukumo, that time he asked her to kill him. Hell, he even nearly told *Tsumiki.* But not Megumi. Not the person who all of this has revolved around. Yuuji has never told Megumi that he's relived the same life over and over—he's only ever tried to fix things from behind the scenes. Trying to stop things before they happen, trying to keep Megumi from doing this or doing that. He changed the entire course of Megumi's life in the last timeline and never even told him why.

Yuuji has never given Megumi a choice.

Well. He's got the chance now.

Yuuji stands where Gojo once stood. Yuuji stands in the place where Megumi's future changed forever—in the place where he gave away his chance to live a normal life.

Yuuji can change that. Right here and right now, as he faces a six-year-old Megumi, tiny and adorable with his schoolbag on his shoulders. Yuuji can save him by letting him go—no ultimatum, no false decision between the Zen'in and service to the school, no survival that he doesn't want.

Maybe, in the afterlife, this version of Megumi can grow up truly free of sorcery. Maybe he and Tsumiki will get to have their home-cooked meals and sun-dried laundry. Maybe this version of Megumi will never remember Yuuji at all, and he'll pass on to his next life without regrets. Maybe one day Yuuji will walk past someone on the street, fifteen or sixteen years younger than him, and neither of them will recognise the other.

A sob catches in Yuuji's throat. He forces it back down. This isn't about him.

Megumi squints up at him. "What's with the face?"

"Nothing," Yuuji replies, his voice thick. He's crying. He knows he's crying. Megumi looks thoroughly weirded-out, and Yuuji, absurdly, wants to laugh. "It's just...I'll be lonely without you, Megumi."

And there it is, the bare and bitter truth: Yuuji is lonely without him. There are others, of course—other friends, other people, other lovers if Yuuji lives long enough for that—but there won't be another Megumi. If he's gone, then a crucial part of Yuuji goes with him, and Yuuji will always feel like the space beside him is missing something.

I'll be lonely without you, he says, but what he really means is *I love you.* What he really means is *if you're gone, then things will change.* What he really means is *it's okay if you leave, but I'll miss you. I'll really, really miss you.*

He hopes that Megumi hears all the things he doesn't say outright, because Yuuji won't be able to say them to his face. They're out of time—Sukuna is here.

Yuuji leaves Megumi there, alone in that alleyway. The choice is his to make. He turns his attention to Sukuna instead, the two halves of his soul converging into one bleeding, half-blind whole. He coughs, raising his arms to try and block another attack—

Sukuna's body tilts sideways.

Did he trip? No—Yuuji glances down, and Sukuna's left leg's submerged in a puddle of shadow, forcing him off-balance. Shadows are Megumi's technique, but Sukuna stole Megumi's body, so...

Except—except Sukuna looks shocked. All four of his eyes are wide enough to see white all around the pupil. Which means that shadow was Megumi's. It was *Megumi's.*

Megumi is still here. He's—

He's *still here.*

Yuuji offered him a gentle death, and he refused it. He's—he's here. He's fighting. Despite it all, he's fighting. He's chosen to fight.

He's chosen to *live.*

Relief crashes into Yuuji like a tidal wave. Megumi's done it. He's *done it.* He listened to what Yuuji had to say and he decided to live. Megumi—his brave Megumi—

As he socks a stunned Sukuna in the face, Yuuji can't help but smile.

When Yuuji's Domain shatters, he hardly dares to believe it.

He'll think about Kugisaki later. It still feels impossible that she could be alive, that she had created the perfect opening for Yuuji just like she did in Shibuya. The very idea of it makes Yuuji feel like he'll choke on his own emotions. He'll think about her later, when he can see her with his own eyes, like he can see Megumi now.

Because there: *that's* Megumi.

His body looks like his own again. Paler, shorter, and skinnier than Sukuna, with the normal amount of arms. His hair is a black mess over his head, obscuring his eyes. Yuuji can't tell if

he's alive or dead. If his chest is moving, it's too small and too far away for Yuuji to see.

He wants nothing more than to run to him. But first, he has a curse to take care of.

Sukuna is...well. If *this* is what he looks like outside of a host body, then Yuuji understands why he was screaming when the Domain shattered, why he was trying to cling to Megumi with all his strength. Yuuji stands above him now and looks down at the shapeless, blobby, one-eyed thing that used to be the King of Curses.

Sukuna looks up at him with something that could be fear. Yuuji stares at him and honestly finds that he can feel nothing but pity.

"What's it gonna be, Sukuna?" he asks. His voice is an awful, ragged thing. Sukuna doesn't answer.

It's sad. Sukuna values power above all else, and here he is, powerless. What else is left for him? How is this, in any way, a proper death?

Yuuji kneels down and picks him up. "Sukuna," he says, looking him right in the eye. "You are me."

He knows Sukuna will see it as an insult, but really, he just means it as fact. "We're born into this world unconsciously shouldering curses," he tells him. "What sort of monster you turn into is decided entirely by your luck, and...I had my gramps."

He wonders if Sukuna can hear the underlying question: *I was loved. Were you?*

"Sukuna," he says softly. In his hands, Sukuna is starting to fizzle and burn. Smoke rises from his form, acrid and sour. "Let's try it one more time. Living not by cursing someone, but by living alongside them. Even if no one else accepts you, I'll live with you."

For a long handful of moments, there's nothing but the hissing sound of smoke. Then Sukuna lets out a sound that might be a chuckle.

"I'm impressed you'd take this farce so far, Itadori Yuuji," he says, which might be the first time he's ever complimented Yuuji on anything. Yuuji can't see his eye or his mouth by now —the whole body's curling up on itself, shrivelling like a piece of paper on fire. "Don't underestimate me. I'm a *curse."*

Those are, as it turns out, his last words. Like a candle being snuffed out, like a tree falling with no one to hear it, Ryomen Sukuna dissolves in Yuuji's hands. He's there and then he's gone, nothing but smoke and a lingering weight on Yuuji's palm.

For a moment, Yuuji kneels there and stares. He doesn't know why, but he feels almost sad. Like—he failed, somehow. Like he should've tried harder.

There's one thing, though, that he hasn't failed at yet. Not this time.

Slowly, Yuuji lifts his head. With Sukuna gone, he finally, *finally,* has an unobstructed view of Megumi.

It's like a waking dream. He walks to Megumi's side in a daze, kneels beside him with nothing but static in his head. He reaches down to wrap his arms around Megumi's back and pull him into a half-sitting position.

He's injured. There are wounds on his face where the skin split open to accomodate Sukuna's extra eyes. There's two more under his armpits, one for each extra arm that Sukuna had, and a shallow horizontal line across his stomach where the extra mouth was. But they're all just flesh wounds. Nothing life-threatening, nothing world-ending. Slowly, with shaking hands, Yuuji reaches up to push the hair out of Megumi's face. His eyes are closed. His head lolls back in Yuuji's grip, limp.

But when Yuuji puts his ear to Megumi's chest, he hears it: a heartbeat. It's steady and strong, a rhythmic beat that Yuuji can feel when he presses his hand to Megumi's pulsepoint. It's still beating. Megumi's still...he's still..

There, in the wreckage of Shinjuku, Yuuji holds Megumi closer and cries. And in his arms, he can feel Megumi's ribcage moving as he breathes, because he's alive. Alive. *Alive.*

Fushiguro Megumi is *alive.*

Chapter End Notes

- EVERYBODY CLAP. OUR BOY FINALLY DID IT.

- next chapter will have that sweet sweet itafushi reunion and happy ending that i've dangled over your heads for over a month now. i'll try to get it out quicker than usual!

- again, a lot of the dialogue in this was lifted straight from the manga, but I paraphrased some parts (mostly in yuuji's monologue) to make it flow a bit better in english.

- do you guys ever get emotional over the fact that yuuji's domain was created solely to save megumi? because i do. i do all the time

- i have to say that 265 is my favourite chapter, even more than 266, because the yuuji-sukuna dynamic is SO fucking funny. that one panel where yuuji's like "one time i ate too much ice cream and threw up" and sukuna responds "so you were born stupid?" is my favourite exchange of theirs in the whole manga. i find it hilarious that both megumi and yuuji are exceptions to sukuna's "i dont care" rule of thumb but for completely opposite reasons

- speaking of 265, i have a lot of hcs about it. mostly i hc that, since yuuji doesn't have an innate technique, his domain is actually just an empty customisable barrier shell. i also don't think yuuji enforced a non-violence rule in 265. i genuinely think sukuna just went along with everything out of pure curiosity, because for once yuuji had actually

surprised him and he was like "wait this could be interesting". he only attacked once he realised yuuji's ideals were unshaken (biggest hater fr).

- by the way, interest check: i'm considering making a companion work that would just be deleted scenes and characterisation notes for this fic. would you guys be interested in that? let me know!

- chapter title is from mitski's 'i will', which is extremely shinjuku era itafushi coded (lyric video linked bc the lyrics are essential):
"And while you sleep
I'll be scared
So by the time you wake
I'll be brave"

Chapter 7: the soft animal of your body

Chapter Notes

my apologies for the late chapter! i got hit with the ao3 author curse and life has been hectic. hopefully this chapter makes up for it, because it is a HUGE 27k words. remember when i said that chapter 5 would be the longest chapter by far? yeah. at the time, i thought that was true. Whoops.

UPDATE: there is now some absolutely beautiful art of this fic; i'm putting them all here because i don't have enough characters in the endnote 😭. please note that the second and third are of scenes in this last chapter!!
- this gorgeous art by bilateralynn on twt of the jacob's ladder scene in ch2!
- there's this wonderful art by kiddykasa on tumblr of the last scene in this chapter!!
- and there is also this incredible art by t_eia_art on twitter!
- and this beautiful art of the last scene in chapter 5 (yes, THAT scene) and this art of yuuji with all his scars, both by ssbsmi_ibslwyf on twt. please go show all of them some love!!

also, i have a twitter now :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If someone asked Yuuji what happened after Sukuna's death, he wouldn't be able to tell them a thing.

His memory is a black hole. His body, it feels, has been carved up into pieces—not literally, Yuuji knows what that feels like, but metaphorically. He's not a complete person. He's been broken up into his composite parts. Here are his eyes, wet with tears. Here is his mouth, parched dry from sobbing; his lungs, too-small; his head, aching. Here are his hands, splayed flat on Megumi's chest and neck to feel the steady beat of his heart.

He knows that, at some point, Ieiri appears in Shinjuku. She kneels down next to Megumi first, her hands wrapping around Yuuji's wrists and leaving bloody smears behind. She tugs him away for long enough to inspect Megumi. The wounds Sukuna left on his face and stomach have healed unnaturally fast—they've already scarred over, a set of dark slashes on Megumi's skin. Yuuji watches, his heart in his throat, as Ieiri cups Megumi's face in her hands and turns his head this way and that.

The very first time Megumi died, Ieiri had known right away. She's not the type to stay when she knows she can't do anything. She'd given up, right then and there, and left Megumi's body in the rubble.

This time, she stares at Megumi for a moment, then lets go.

"He's fine," she says curtly, and Yuuji sags like all of his muscles have been cut. The relief is so intense it makes him feel sick. "That scar won't even affect his vision. And you, Itadori-kun—are you dying?"

It's a stupid question. Megumi is alive, so how could Yuuji be dying? Ieiri is staring at him, though, her eyes dark and intense, so Yuuji shakes his head. He's got no life-threatening injuries, nothing that he can't treat with his own Reverse Cursed Technique. Ieiri looks at him a moment longer, then nods.

After that, she's gone. She leaves Yuuji there, kneeling in the dust with Megumi held to his chest, and goes off to do...whatever it is she does. Yuuji doesn't move, doesn't breathe, doesn't blink. He's scared that if he looks away from Megumi then this will end. He reaches up and cups his hand over Megumi's mouth so that he can feel the steady exhale of his breath every few seconds.

Someone gets him to move eventually. It's not Ieiri. The voice is higher, bouncier; Yuuji doesn't dare take his eyes off Megumi to look.

"Shoko-san said you're not dying, so up you get, Yuu-chan!"

Kirara, Yuuji recognises distantly, letting her help him up with a hand on his elbow. He stumbles, his head spinning, and an animal, panicked sound escapes his throat when Megumi slips in his grasp. He tightens his grip so intensely that he feels Megumi's ribs pressing against the pads of his fingers, but Megumi is still so inexplicably *heavy,* or Yuuji is inexplicably weak. He can't carry him. He *can't carry him.* He's going to drop him.

Yuuji makes a desperate noise. "I—help me, I can't hold him, I—"

Kirara reaches out and brushes a thumb across Megumi's cheek. Yuuji jerks back a little as black text unfurls on Megumi's skin: a little star, labelled *Mimosa.* Then Kirara taps her fingers against Yuuji's wrist, and the same text appears on him. Yuuji lets out an *oof* as some invisible force immediately pulls him and Megumi even closer together, like two of the world's strongest magnets. He couldn't let go of Megumi if he tried.

"There you go, Yuu-chan," Kirara says, sounding satisfied. "No one can take him from you now."

Yuuji looses a breath and wraps his arms even tighter around Megumi, hoisting him up in a bridal carry. He buries his face in Megumi's hair for a moment and just breathes.

No one can take him from you now. Not Sukuna, not Kenjaku, not even Yuuji himself—the only way Yuuji's ever letting Megumi go now is if Megumi asks him to.

"Thank you," he croaks out. Kirara hums, patting his arm supportively.

"No need, Yuu-chan," she says. "But, you know, you should relax a little. You don't wanna leave bruises on him."

Yuuji knows that she's right, but he can't bring himself to lighten his grip. Even with the security of Kirara's technique holding him and Megumi together, some instinctive part of his hindbrain is terrified that he'll drop Megumi the second he uncurls his fingers. So he holds on, and he focuses on putting one foot in front of the other, and he blindly lets Kirara steer him through the rubble to wherever the others are gathered.

Yuuji doesn't know how they end up at Jujutsu Tech.

It's like he's been half-awake this whole time. He blinks, and it's night. Megumi lies sleeping in one of the infirmary beds with the sheets drawn up to his chest. Yuuji's curled up in a chair by his bedside, one hand intertwined with Megumi's; Kirara's stars are gone from both of them now, the need no longer there.

Yuuji's still in his uniform, torn and bloody. His eyes hurt. His throat hurts. His head hurts. When he tries to pull up the memory of coming back to the school, the only thing his brain can conjure is the feeling of Megumi's heartbeat, the soft whistle of his breath, the flicker of his eyelashes as his eyes moved beneath the lids. The only thing Yuuji remembers is that Megumi is alive.

A footstep scuffs against the floor, and Yuuji startles. He whips around, every muscle in his body tensing.

In the doorway, Ieiri raises her hands. Yuuji forces himself to relax.

"Ieiri-san," he says, and he's shocked at how hoarse his voice is. Ieiri grimaces.

"You need to drink some water," she says, scanning him critically. "But first, I'd like to take a look at you, Itadori-kun. Everyone else is stable now, or as close as they can be to it, so..."

She blinks furiously, then reaches up to press the heels of her hands into her eyes. Her sleeves are shoved up past her elbows, and they're entirely soaked with blood. In the blue darkness of the infirmary, Yuuji can't tell, but some of the stains look like they've already turned brown.

"Just...let me look, please, Itadori-kun," she says wearily. Yuuji swallows, glancing back at Megumi. To take his hand away now feels like ripping out his own rib. Ieiri looks between the two of them, then sighs.

"It's just you and me in here," she says. "Fushiguro-kun won't be waking up anytime soon, so if it'd make you feel better, I can inspect you here."

"Please," Yuuji rasps. Ieiri nods, moving closer. Her shoes clack against the tiled floor, echoing slightly.

"Shirt off," she says. Yuuji complies, reaching for the tattered hem of his shirt and pulling it up over his head. His head's too blank, too full of disbelieving static, to remember why that's a bad idea—until Ieiri inhales sharply.

"I've been awake for forty-eight hours, Itadori-kun, so tell me if I'm remembering wrong," she says, "but I don't recall seeing you get your head sliced off."

Yuuji freezes halfway through letting his shirt drop to the floor. It's already all the way off, goosebumps raising on his skin in the cold, so there's no point in trying to deny it. All of his marks from Megumi's past deaths are on full display: the huge Hollow Purple circles, the lightning-mark of Jacob's Ladder, the countless other slashes and stabs from wounds that should have been—wounds that *were*—fatal.

The one that Ieiri's eyes are fixed on is the most damning of the lot: the line around Yuuji's throat. The mark of a decapitation. Any other injury could be explained away as Yuuji healing himself, but both he and Ieiri know that no one can heal their own head being cut off. Reverse Cursed Technique *comes* from the head. It's just not possible.

Yuuji swallows.

"Itadori-kun," Ieiri says, the words barely more than a whisper. Yuuji looks up at her and finds that she looks monumentally tired. The bags beneath her eyes are bruise-purple, like someone pressed their thumbs into her eye sockets long enough to hurt. Her hair is stringy, some of it sticking to her forehead with sweat. What did she say earlier? Forty-eight hours? Has it already been that long since they all left to fight Sukuna?

"Itadori-kun," Ieiri says again, when Yuuji doesn't answer. "If this has anything to do with Sukuna, then I need you to tell me now."

Yuuji lurches forward. "No!" he blurts out. "No, it's—it's nothing to do with Sukuna. I promise, Ieiri-san. We don't have to worry about him anymore."

Yuuji knows that he's telling the truth. He doesn't know *how* he knows, but...Sukuna won't be coming back. Sneaky comebacks after being defeated aren't his style; in fact, he'd probably find it embarrassing. The only thing Yuuji understands about Sukuna is the fact that he will never understand Sukuna, but still—he knows that, when Sukuna laughed as he died, that was his acknowledgement of surrender.

Ieiri squints at him. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure," Yuuji tells her firmly. "None of these are to do with Sukuna."

Ieiri, he finds, is in some ways very similar to Gojo. The way she looks at him now, sharp and knowing, makes him shiver. Finally, though, she nods, and Yuuji relaxes.

"I'd still like to take a look," she says, raising her hands to rest on either side of Yuuji's head. "I can see you've got no major wounds, other than the obvious. How's the eye?"

Ah. So Yuuji wasn't imagining it. He'd been hoping everything was just dark, or that he was running on too little sleep, but...

He swallows, reaching up to touch his right eye as the familiar stinging sensation of Ieiri's Reverse Cursed Technique starts trickling through his body. He did heal himself after the fight, so there's only a few minor scratches for her to fix up, other than...well.

"I don't think I can see out of it," Yuuji admits. He brushes his fingers against the dried bloody mess of his right eye and hisses at the sharp stab of pain. Ieiri clicks her tongue and swats his hand away, then leans down to peer at his eye. She reaches up one hand and holds it far to Yuuji's right; Yuuji's stomach sinks as he watches the hand disappear from his field of view far sooner than it should.

"Can you see that?"

"No."

Ieiri brings her hand a little closer. "How about now?"

"Still no."

"Now?"

"A little."

"Hm." Ieiri straightens up, removing her other hand from Yuuji's head. There's a hot prickling feeling in Yuuji's eye now; he winces, trying to resist the urge to reach up and scratch. "Eyes are tricky, Itadori-kun, and when you healed the rest of your body after the fight, you started the scarring process. I'm sorry, but I don't think I can regenerate it. If you're careful to not heal yourself any more, then I can try to restore some of your vision, but...it's looking like you'll have to go without your right eye from now on." She huffs out a dry laugh. "At any rate, I'm sure Kugisaki will find it funny."

Yuuji jerks his head up. Holy shit, he'd nearly forgotten. "Kugisaki? Is she—"

"She's fine. Did her job and went right back to sleep. You can go see her in the morning." Ieiri leans back, crossing her arms over her chest. She looks down at Yuuji, chewing on the inside of her cheek, before she sighs.

"Itadori-kun," she says. "I won't force you to tell me. If you say it's not a danger to the rest of us, then I trust you. But I would like to ask you some questions about those scars, because I know for a fact that you did not have them before Shinjuku—and you didn't get them in Shinjuku, either. At least, not all of them."

She looks pointedly at the scar on Yuuji's neck. Yuuji reaches up to rub at it self-consciously, but he nods nonetheless. *Go ahead.*

"Alright," Ieiri says briskly. "First question: before Satoru went off to fight, he said there was something off with your cursed energy. Is this why?"

It's close enough, so Yuuji nods again. Ieiri closes her eyes for a moment and exhales, a long, controlled breath.

"I see," she says, before opening her eyes again. "Second question: does it have to do with Fushiguro?"

Yuuji stiffens. Something ugly and protective rears to life in his stomach, and he has to resist the urge to reach an arm back to bar Megumi's sleeping body—but it's useless. From the way Ieiri's brows lift, she knows that that reaction's as good as a yes.

Yuuji gives up the act. He doesn't even know why he was holding up an act in the first place. "How'd you know?" he asks, and Ieiri snorts out something that could be a laugh.

"Intuition," she says dryly. There's an undertone in her voice that makes Yuuji squint at her. There's an inside joke here that he's being left out on, he can *feel* it, but Ieiri's clearly not going to share. "You're way too crazy about him now. Reminds me of someone I knew. I figured that something must have happened." Her mouth twitches in an almost-smile. "And you started calling him Megumi."

She reaches up towards her mouth with two fingers, then pauses when she finds no cigarette between her teeth. For a second, she stands there, frozen, before her shoulders slump.

"Anyway, Itadori-kun," she says, letting her hand drop back to her side. "Last chance. You want to tell me where you got those?"

Yuuji weighs his options. His gut is telling him to keep it a secret, but...why? There's no point. Megumi is alive now, and Sukuna is gone.

Besides, he feels like he owes Ieiri, just a little. Way back at the start, she was the one who told him it was a Binding Vow in the first place. Without her, it probably would've taken Yuuji ages to figure out what was happening to him.

So: "I broke a Binding Vow," he admits. Ieiri's brow twitches upward, but she says nothing. "I promised I'd save him, and I didn't. So I went back in time and kept trying until I did." He presses a hand to the left side of his stomach, where the mark of that very first Hollow Purple sits like a brand. "These are all the injuries that killed him."

Ieiri sucks in a breath. "Ah," she says, her eyes skipping over the countless marks on Yuuji's skin. He can practically see the wheels in her brain turning, the realisation that every single scar was another one of Megumi's deaths. "So, earlier, when Satoru asked about your energy..."

"I don't really get it either," Yuuji says, picking at a loose thread on his pants. "Apparently it's 'tangled', but I feel fine."

"I see," Ieiri murmurs, furrowing her brow. "Let me ask you another question, Itadori-kun." She looks up at the ceiling for a moment, then sighs. "Did you know Satoru was going to die?"

Yuuji freezes.

Irrational panic flares in his stomach. He scans Ieiri for any sign of hostility, but she's completely calm. She's just looking at him, calm and totally neutral-looking, like she didn't just ask him if he could've prevented the death of the world's strongest sorcerer.

"...Yes," Yuuji confesses quietly. His voice cracks a little. "I—I'm sorry. I would've told him, but I already tried that, and every time I did then Megumi would...he'd..."

He flails around uselessly for something to say. Ieiri holds up a hand, and Yuuji snaps his jaw shut.

"So," she says, tilting her head down to look at him. He can't read her expression. "You didn't tell him, because you wanted to ensure you could save Fushiguro."

When she says it like that, Yuuji feels sick.

"I'm sorry," he manages to say again, the words wobbly and weak. Gojo was Ieiri's friend, after all; they'd been in the same year at school. God, they're like Yuuji and Kugisaki—and Yuuji had traded Gojo's life for Megumi's. "I...are you mad at me?"

Ieiri blinks. Then, to Yuuji's surprise, she huffs out a laugh.

"Itadori-kun," she says wryly, rubbing a hand over her face. "Why would I be mad at you for doing the same thing Satoru did?"

...Huh?

"Huh?" Yuuji wheezes, staring at her. Ieiri shakes her head.

"Satoru knew what he was getting into," she says plainly. Her gaze slides over to Megumi, fast asleep. "If he had the chance to trade himself for a shot at saving Fushiguro, he would've taken it. He *did* take it, actually. So don't worry, Itadori-kun—I'm sure that idiot's proud of you, wherever he is."

She reaches out and places an awkward hand on Yuuji's shoulder. Yuuji blinks down at it, nonplussed. He doesn't think Ieiri's ever touched him outside of a medical context before.

"Good work on saving him, Itadori," she says softly, and for some stupid reason, that makes Yuuji's eyes burn with tears. She's not Gojo. He *knows* she's not Gojo. But still, somehow, he thinks he hears his teacher's voice.

"Thanks, Ieiri-san," he chokes out, reaching up to wipe furiously at his face. Ieiri pats his shoulder stiffly, then withdraws.

"Get some sleep," she says. "And drink some water. You sound awful."

"Yes, Ieiri-san."

"And go sleep in your own bed. There's one right there. *Don't* climb into Fushiguro's."

"Yes, Ieiri-san."

She moves to the door, then pauses, glancing back. "Itadori-kun?"

"Yeah?"

"Come talk to me if you need to," she says. Her eyes linger on Yuuji's scars. "I can't promise I'll be good at it, but I can guarantee that I'll listen."

Yuuji fights back a sob. "Okay, Ieiri-san," he says, sniffling pathetically. "Thanks."

Ieiri nods at him, then leaves. Yuuji stares after her, then slowly reaches down to pick up his shirt and tug it back on.

He disobeys Ieiri's orders completely: he crawls under the covers with Megumi and keeps one hand splayed on his chest. He knows it's not good—the bed's cramped, and it's probably not great for him to be contaminating Megumi's sheets with his gross bloody uniform—but to give up physical contact right now feels like torture. He can't fall asleep until he syncs his breathing to Megumi's, following the steady inhale-exhale of a boy who is alive.

When he wakes up in the morning, someone's yelling at him.

"...the hell! Aren't you supposed to be crying at my bedside or something?! A little appreciation would be nice!"

Yuuji lifts his head blearily, blinking. His vision's shot, since his right eye's basically useless, but he can still make out the blurry silhouette of someone standing over him and Megumi. He instinctively splays himself over Megumi to protect him, panic sparking in his chest, until he recognises the voice. And the hair.

He reaches up to rub at his one working eye, and his vision clears. Yuuji's heart gets stuck in his throat.

"Hi," he croaks, looking up at Kugisaki.

"Hi? *Hi?"* Kugisaki puts her hands on her hips. "That's all you have to say? Why aren't you grovelling or something?"

"'M too tired to grovel," Yuuji mumbles. He's mumbling because, if he speaks any louder, he'll start to cry.

"You look like shit," Kugisaki informs him, which is rich of her to say when she's been in a coma for the last two months and looks like it. She's paler than he remembers, her cheeks a little hollow and sickly-looking. Her hair's longer, and she's got a solid black eyepatch covering her left eye. She looks just as shitty as Yuuji does. She also, however, has never looked more beautiful.

"Hi," he says again, and his voice breaks. Ah. There are the tears. "I missed you."

"Ew," Kugisaki says, wrinkling her nose. "Don't say that. That's gross."

"Wha—but I did!"

"Still! You're not meant to say it! You're meant to show your appreciation by spoiling me and buying me things for the rest of my life!"

"That's stupid," Yuuji says. He pushes himself upright, far enough that he can grab Kugisaki's sleeve and drag her into a hug. Kugisaki grunts, slapping his arm half-heartedly, but she still sits down on the edge of Megumi's bed to hug him back.

"Dumbass," she grumbles in his ear. Yuuji lets out a choked laugh. "You're both dumbasses. You and Fushiguro. What'd you do to your eye? Stop copying me."

"I'm not copying you! They're different eyes!"

"That doesn't matter!"

"It so does!"

"No it *doesn't."* She pinches him, and Yuuji yelps. Then he feels her shift, propping her chin on his shoulder to peer down at where Megumi still sleeps. "He hasn't woken up yet?"

Yuuji forces himself to breathe normally. In and out, nice and regular. "Not yet."

"He'll do it eventually," Kugisaki declares, without a hint of hesitation. She says it like a fact, not a question: Megumi will wake up. He *has* to wake up. Yuuji and Kugisaki both refuse to accept any other outcome.

Yuuji tightens his arms around her. "Yeah," he says into her hair, blinking back tears. "He'll wake up."

Megumi doesn't wake up.

At least, he doesn't wake up the day after Yuuji sees Kugisaki again. He doesn't wake up the day after that, either. Or the day after that.

...Or the day after that.

So: in the aftermath, Yuuji waits.

It's a warm December. They don't get much snow. The new year comes and goes with mostly everyone still stuck in the infirmary; Miwa from Kyoto makes everyone toshikoshi soba, since Yuuji's not willing to leave Megumi's bedside for long enough to make a meal for over a dozen people. He's not even willing to leave Megumi's bedside for long enough to make a meal for himself.

Physically, Megumi is fine. His scars from Sukuna look nasty, but they won't affect his health at all. In fact, the wound that Ieiri says dealt him the most lasting damage is Yuuji's own Black Flash: a starburst scar right in the middle of Megumi's chest, the final blow that punched Sukuna out of Megumi's body. Yuuji will apologise for that when Megumi wakes up. Aside from those few scars, Megumi is almost entirely physically unharmed.

Mentally, though, it's another story entirely.

"There's no guaranteeing what he'll be like when he wakes," Ieiri warns Yuuji. "That is, if he wakes up at all. He took the impact of multiple Infinite Voids. It's a miracle that his brain hasn't started leaking out through his nose."

Yuuji winces a bit at the imagery, but it's nothing he didn't expect. The more he thinks about it, the more amazed he is that Megumi survived at all. He spent a month with Sukuna suppressing him, bore the brunt of Mahoraga's adaptation to Infinite Void, had his body metamorphosed into Sukuna's...

And yet, at the end of it all, he's still here. He *chose* to be here.

Yuuji brings him flowers while he sleeps: camellias from the abandoned florist shops in the city, daffodils from the public parks, tiny nameless white flowers that he finds sprouting from the cracks in the concrete. Kugisaki complains that they make her nose itch when it's her turn to sit vigil by Megumi's bedside, but she doesn't ever attempt to move them. She and Yuuji trade off reading aloud from a well-loved book they found in Megumi's room: *The Body,* by Yuasa Yasuo. Yuuji doesn't really understand it, but judging from the little post-it notes and coloured stickers that Megumi's left on the pages, he likes it well enough.

So the weeks pass like this. January rolls by slowly, day after day of Yuuji sitting by Megumi's bedside and watching the rise and fall of his chest. He develops a habit of holding Megumi's hand so that their wrists are pressed together and Yuuji can feel the flutter of Megumi's pulse against his own. He shapes his days around that pulse, lets it sink into his bones and write itself into his brain. Megumi has a pulse. Megumi is alive. Everything is over and Megumi is alive.

Alive. Alive. Yuuji has to repeat it to himself constantly, has to keep reassuring himself by hovering his face over Megumi's mouth to feel the soft exhale of breath on his cheek. It's excessive and creepy and Ieiri scolds him for it, says he needs to focus on his own recovery too, but...

But Yuuji has to. He just—he *has* to. His recovery is Megumi's recovery. As long as Megumi is alright, then Yuuji will be too.

When Megumi finally opens his eyes, Yuuji is right there with him.

It's one of those days where the sun is bright but cold. Yuuji's set aside *The Body* in favour of rearranging the daffodils by Megumi's bedside. He's humming to himself, inspecting a petal with a faint smudge that may or may not be a spot, when he hears a faint rustle.

He goes still.

At first, he doesn't let himself believe it. It's a trick of his ears. It's the wind. It's someone in another room, further down the hall. But then the rustle comes again, louder and definitely too close to be anyone else, and Yuuji feels his breath stop.

He turns his head.

Megumi's hand twitches where it lies on the sheets. Slowly, as if in a dream, Yuuji reaches out and covers it with his own.

"Megumi?" he whispers.

When Megumi's eyes flicker open, Yuuji starts to cry.

It's silent. The tears just start welling up, and then they roll down his face, fat drops that go all the way down to his chin before falling onto Megumi's bedsheets. Yuuji doesn't try to stop them. He doesn't try to wipe them away. Wiping them away would mean using one of his hands to do something that *isn't* holding Megumi, and Yuuji finds that unacceptable.

Megumi's eyes are greener than the first spring leaves. He blinks once, slow like a cat. His gaze darts around the room before finally landing on Yuuji.

"Itadori?" he mumbles, and Yuuji immediately chokes back a sob. Oh. *Oh.* He's really here. He's really alive.

"Hi," Yuuji croaks out. His voice cracks embarrassingly. "Megumi, you—how're you feeling?"

Megumi doesn't answer for a second. He opens his mouth, then closes it again. His brow furrows. He looks confused. Yuuji's grin falters.

"...Megumi?"

"Itadori," Megumi says slowly, his voice coming out slurred. "Wha' happened to your eye?"

"Post-traumatic amnesia," Ieiri says, when she steps out of Megumi's room half an hour later. She'd kicked Yuuji out after Yuuji called her in a panic, telling her that Megumi didn't seem to know anything about Sukuna, or Shinjuku, or—or *anything.* "I expected it, honestly. He was under Infinite Void for, what—five minutes?"

"Six," Yuuji says automatically. He'd gone back to double-check the time with Mei-Mei, once Ieiri made it clear that Infinite Void was what was keeping Megumi unconscious. Six minutes, approximately; in other words, a lifetime.

Ieiri sighs. "Six minutes," she says, peeling off her gloves and tossing them in the bin. "One minute already causes more than enough brain damage to kill the average sorcerer. Technically, the damage was to his soul, not his body. I suspect that's the only reason why he's still alive." She looks over at the closed door, grimacing. "For now, he seems to have both retrograde and anterograde amnesia. His memory of the last two months is vague at best, and he can't retain new information."

It feels like a boulder being dropped on Yuuji's head. He stares at Ieiri, waiting for her to add something else, to say it's a joke, but...

But Ieiri just stares back.

"He—can he—" Yuuji wets his lips. "Can he get better?"

"Hard to tell." Ieiri taps her foot against the floor. "It's not caused by a disease, so there's nothing to treat. For now, he just needs to rest, and we'll see if he improves." She purses her lips. "Itadori. Don't freak out about this. It's natural—he suffered a bad injury. A *lot* of bad injuries. He was never going to come out without some kind of consequence."

"Okay," Yuuji says, his voice small and fragile. *Don't freak out,* Ieiri said, but how can he not? Megumi's—Megumi has *amnesia.* Megumi doesn't even remember what's happened to him.

...Does he even know that Gojo is dead? Does he know that *Tsumiki* is dead?

"Can I see him?" Yuuji asks.

Ieiri looks over at the door. "I don't see why not," she says. "I've told him he's missing some memories, but not...anything major. Don't tell him anything yet, please. I don't want to shock him too badly."

"Okay," Yuuji says. He feels jittery, restless—he needs to see Megumi awake. "So, can I...?"

Ieiri sighs. "Yes, fine, go ahead," she says, and Yuuji scrambles forward to shove the door open. He shoves it a little too hard, because it swings right into the wall with a loud bang, and Megumi—sitting upright in his bed—jumps.

"Itadori!" Ieiri barks.

"Sorry, sorry!" Yuuji says back, cringing. Ieiri glowers at him as he creeps into the room, but Yuuji can't pay her any attention, because Megumi's *right there.*

He's holding *The Body* in his hands. He stares at Yuuji, brows raised.

"Hi," Yuuji croaks out.

Megumi's mouth twitches. "Hi."

He *looks* normal. Aside from the scars and the general air of tiredness from being unconscious in a bed for weeks on end, Megumi looks just as he did before the possession. In fact—Yuuji's heart aches—he looks just like he did back in that hotel in Tokyo, when he woke up after Kurusu found him on the ground.

Yuuji coughs, moving to his bedside. Megumi had recognised him, at least, so he knows who Yuuji is, but...what else does he remember? Yuuji tries to gauge Megumi's reactions to him, but he can't really tell. Megumi tracks him with his eyes as he sits down in the chair by his bed.

"So," Yuuji says. "You're up."

Megumi closes his book and sets it aside. "Apparently," he says dryly.

"And you're...feeling okay?"

"Slight headache. That's all."

"Oh. That's good. That's, uh...really good." Yuuji curls his hands into fists on his knees and wants to die from the awkwardness. When he imagined Megumi waking up, he'd thought...he doesn't know what he thought. Mostly he'd been focused on the *waking up* part. But he knows that he hadn't expected this.

"I can tell what you're thinking, Itadori," Megumi says flatly, and Yuuji snaps his head up. "I remember a lot, if that's what you were going to ask. I remember that whole thing at the detention centre. I remember that dumb stunt you pulled with Gojo-sensei at the Goodwill Event. And I remember that I summoned Mahoraga in Shibuya." He looks down at his hands, flexing his fingers. "Did it take me out? Is that why I'm here?"

Yuuji's breath catches. Megumi...

Megumi's forgotten a lot more than Yuuji thought.

"Ieiri-san says I can't tell you yet," Yuuji says, and Megumi scowls. It almost makes Yuuji want to laugh. "But, uh...it's been a few months since then. We were separated for a while. It sucked." He fidgets with his fingers to resist the urge to hold Megumi's hand. "I missed you."

Megumi's eyes widen ever so slightly. Yuuji offers him a grin that hopefully doesn't look too heartbroken.

"Oh," Megumi says, and blinks. His eyes linger on the right side of Yuuji's face, and on his scarred eye. "It's been months? Ieiri-san said something earlier, but..." He frowns. Yuuji's heart sinks.

He can't retain new information, Ieiri had said. By the end of the day, will he even remember this conversation with Yuuji?

"It's February," Yuuji tells him. Megumi nods slowly, mouthing it to himself under his breath. Yuuji wishes he could reach into his skull and squish Megumi's brain into the right shape for it to start working again.

Then a growling sound cuts through the silence. It takes Yuuji a second to realise where it came from, but then Megumi's face flushes, and his hand instinctively shifts to his stomach. Yuuji can't help the grin that breaks out across his face.

"You hungry?"

"Shut up," Megumi snaps, which is a yes. Yuuji laughs.

"I made you meatballs," he tells him, which is true. In the last few weeks, Kugisaki's been dragging him out of the infirmary more and more, insisting that he needs to 'stop sharing oxygen' with Megumi all the time. Yuuji's been making meatballs out of muscle memory.

"Meatballs sound good," Megumi says begrudgingly. Yuuji beams. This, at least, is something tangible that he can do.

"I'll go get them, then," he says. "I even added extra ginger for you, just out of habit."

He starts to stand, only to freeze five seconds later. And he really is frozen, because—because—

"Megumi? Megumi! Are you okay? Why're you crying?"

"I don't *know,"* Megumi snarls. He slaps his hands against his face like it'll stop the tears welling up in his eyes. Yuuji's hands flutter frantically around him, unsure what to do. He's never seen Megumi cry like this before.

"Was it the meatballs?" Yuuji asks, panicked. "I'm sorry! I can get you something else!"

"It's not the damn—*ugh."* Megumi grabs the corner of his blanket and pulls it up to scrub furiously at his eyes. "I don't *know.* This is stupid. Shut up. Just go get your dumb meatballs."

"Technically they're *your* dumb meatballs—"

"Itadori!"

Yuuji goes and gets the dumb meatballs.

He frets the entire time. What the hell was that about? Megumi's never been the type to cry, even in situations where he really should. Crying over *meatballs?* What on earth?

As Yuuji heats the bowl up for him, he steps back and goes over their conversation in his head. He must have said something to set Megumi off. What did he say? He said he made meatballs for Megumi. He said he would go get them. He said he'd added extra ginger out of habit. And then...

Yuuji's brain hooks on that word: *habit.*

Oh.

Back in that vision of the Fushiguro apartment, in that place that didn't truly exist, Megumi had looked at Yuuji and described his ideal world. *Eating meals cooked out of habit.* Even if Megumi doesn't remember, it seems his body does.

Yuuji has to crouch down on the kitchen floor and take a few minutes to breathe past the ache in his chest. Then he has to heat up Megumi's food all over again, because he's let it cool.

When he returns to Megumi's room, he finds Megumi hunched over in bed, leaning forward to inspect the daffodils on his windowsill. He turns around when Yuuji opens the door,

blinking in surprise.

"Itadori?"

Yuuji holds up the tray with Megumi's food on it. "Lunch delivery!" he says brightly.

Megumi's brow furrows. "...What is that?"

Oh. Right. Yuuji's heart falls right down to the pit of his stomach. *He can't retain new information.*

Maybe this is another sick kind of punishment from the universe: another repeating timeline, a day that Yuuji has to live out again and again, not because he's going back in time but because Megumi can't remember it. Yuuji swallows his heart and looks down at the tray.

"Meatballs," he says. And then, with a voice that surprisingly does not shake, he adds: "Extra ginger."

Megumi's memory is unreliable. At first, Yuuji thinks that he's forgotten everything since Shibuya, but that's not true—Megumi wakes up a few days later clawing at his face, gasping out something unintelligible about Sukuna. The worst thing about that was that he'd seen Yuuji and panicked even worse.

"Get out!" Ieiri had barked at Yuuji, as Yuuji stood in the doorway and gaped. Megumi had been shivering on the bed, his eyes wide and unseeing. "Itadori! You look like him—*get out!"*

Maki had ended up hauling Yuuji away from Megumi's room. She'd stayed with him that night, leaning against the wall as Yuuji crouched on the floor and buried his face in his hands.

You look like him. It's the truth: Yuuji's smaller, obviously, and he doesn't have four arms or four eyes or a weird flesh-mask thing on his face, but he and Sukuna share more than a passing resemblance. For all Yuuji knows, Megumi had just seen the pink hair and jumped to conclusions.

...Maybe Yuuji should dye his hair.

He goes to find Megumi the morning after that. Megumi doesn't meet his eyes, mutters something under his breath about how he's sorry he freaked out. Yuuji's heart twists in his chest. Megumi's not the one who should be apologising.

So Yuuji does something he should've done ages ago: he sinks to his knees.

He folds himself into a dogeza position, resting his head on the cool infirmary floor. From the bed, Megumi makes a strangled sound.

"Itadori, *what—"*

"I'm so sorry," Yuuji blurts out, his voice like a river that he can't stop. "Megumi, I—I am *so sorry.* For Sukuna, and everything, and—"

"Itadori."

"No, don't. I need to tell you—"

"Itadori."

"—seriously, Megumi, I—"

"Itadori!" Megumi barks, and something small and stiff hits the nape of Yuuji's neck. He winces, looking up to find *The Body* lying on the floor next to him and Megumi's hand still raised in midair.

"Did you just throw a book at me?" Yuuji asks in disbelief.

Megumi's face flushes a splotchy red. "Did *you* just try to get into *dogeza?"* he hisses back. "What the hell, Itadori?"

"I'm...apologising?"

"For *what?"*

Yuuji sits back on his heels. "For everything," he says incredulously, gesturing around. "For *Sukuna."*

Megumi's face darkens. "You're still going on about that?" he demands, and Yuuji gapes at him. *What?* Yuuji's got every reason to apologise. Keeping Sukuna in check was *his* job, *his* responsibility, and he failed.

Not just that—he failed Megumi in every way imaginable. *This* Megumi doesn't know about the dozens of marks on Yuuji's body, but Yuuji does. He knows what he has to answer for.

"Look, if you don't want to accept it," Yuuji starts, and Megumi's hand spasms. If there was another book within reach, he probably would've thrown it too.

"No, I'm not accepting it, because there's nothing to accept," Megumi snaps. "Now get up. You look like a moron."

"Megumi—"

"No," Megumi says, so venomously that Yuuji actually recoils a bit. "Shut up. I don't want you apologising for something that's not your fault."

Yuuji opens his mouth, but Megumi glowers at him so hard that he decides to pick his battles. He gets up, hovering uncertainly. Megumi looks at him.

"Megumi," Megumi says, rolling his own name around like a marble in his mouth. He raises his brows. "Did that happen while I was gone?"

Technically? Yes. Yuuji had gotten used to calling him that in the last alternate timeline, and he hasn't shaken the habit. But that never happened in this world, so Yuuji shakes his head.

"No, that's just me," he says. "Sorry. I can go back to calling you Fushiguro if you want."

He doesn't want to, but he'll do whatever Megumi wants. Megumi studies him for a moment, then shakes his head.

"I think we're past that," he says, then pauses. "...Yuuji."

The name sends a little burst of warmth through Yuuji's veins. He grins at Megumi, and Megumi scowls in response.

"Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Smiling like an idiot."

"Don't be mean, Megumi," Yuuji tells him. Megumi twitches a little at the name, but doesn't protest. "Also, uh...do you want me to dye my hair? Since it's pink? And, you know, last night..."

"Yuuji."

"Yeah?"

"Don't be stupid."

"...Is that a no?"

Megumi throws his pillow at him this time. Yuuji ducks it and laughs, and when Megumi's mouth turns up a little in response, Yuuji can't help but stare a little.

He can still smile. After all that he's been through, he can still smile. Yuuji will never stop being amazed by him.

Yuuji picks up *The Body* and walks over to sit on the edge of the bed. "So," he says, tapping his fingers on the book's cover. "You, uh...how are you doing?"

It's a dumb question. They both know that the answer can't be anything good. Megumi doesn't answer at first, silently reaching out to take *The Body* from Yuuji's hands instead; his thumb brushes against the stump of Yuuji's left ring finger, neatly severed before the knuckle.

"I don't remember waking up," Megumi says abruptly. Yuuji looks up at him. His mouth is a thin, unhappy line. "I don't know how I got here. Ieiri-san told me I woke up days ago, and

that you and Kugisaki barely leave me alone, but I don't remember any of that." His lip curls. "I only remember *him."*

He says it with more bitterness than Yuuji's ever heard from him. Not just bitterness—disgust, too, like he's looking at something foul and rotten. Yuuji can see his fingers tighten on *The Body,* can see how his knuckles go bone-white. Instinctively, he reaches out to cover Megumi's hand with his own, to try and soothe the tension. Megumi goes still under his touch.

"Sukuna's gone now," Yuuji tells him, firm. A fact. "He's never coming back. And even if he does, I won't let him hurt you again." He looks Megumi dead in the eyes—looks at his irises, the bright jade-green of them, and at the scar that runs straight through the right one. Megumi has survived before, but Yuuji will do everything in his power to make sure he never has to do it again. "You've got me, Megumi. I promise."

For a second, Megumi stares at him. His eyes widen a little bit. Yuuji finds himself leaning in, holding eye contact. He just—he *has* to make sure Megumi knows he means this. He needs Megumi to know that Yuuji won't fail him again. Yuuji would do anything to make sure he never fails Megumi again.

Then Megumi scoffs. "Dumbass," he says. "You think I didn't already know that? Stop talking about yourself like you're so important." He turns his hand in Yuuji's and wraps his fingers around Yuuji's palm. He squeezes once, a firm pressure. "Don't focus too much on keeping me safe. You have to worry about yourself, too."

Yuuji almost laughs. *Don't focus too much on keeping me safe*—how could he? Megumi's everything to him. Megumi wants Yuuji to worry about himself, but, in Yuuji's opinion, worrying about Megumi *is* worrying about himself. In Yuuji's head, they're the same thing.

He knows that Megumi will hit him with the book again for saying that, though, so he settles for squeezing Megumi's hand right back. "Okay," he says softly. "But right now, just let me worry about you."

Megumi grumbles something under his breath in response, but one of them is bedridden and it's not Yuuji, so Megumi can't really protest the fact that Yuuji's in better shape right now. Yuuji stays by his side for the rest of the day, holding his hand and bringing him snacks. Megumi's memory holds up, for the most part, but as the sun starts going down he starts getting a bit slower with his responses to Yuuji's questions. He startles when Yuuji reaches for his hand, as if surprised that Yuuji's there at all. When Yuuji asks him to explain *The Body* to him, since he still doesn't get it, Megumi goes over the same page three times because he keeps forgetting what he's just said. Yuuji, who's curled up on the bed with his head resting next to Megumi's hip, has to turn his face into the sheets so that Megumi doesn't see the angry tears that well up in the corners of his eyes.

When Yuuji goes to see him the next day, Megumi calls him *Itadori* again. Yuuji closes his eyes, counts to ten, and pretends that it doesn't sting.

Recovery is slow.

It soon becomes clear that Megumi's memory depends on the day. Sometimes he remembers what happened in Shinjuku. Sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes he looks around and asks if Gojo's off on a mission again. Ieiri, surprisingly, takes this as a good sign.

"It means the memories are still in his brain somewhere," she tells Yuuji. "I've got hope for him, Itadori-kun. Like I said, the damage is to his soul. If Fushiguro's soul can pull through—and I think he will—then he should be able to recover."

Yuuji clings to that hope like a lifeline. Megumi's memory may change every day, but his behaviour is usually the same—a little distant, a little spacey, except for the days when he gets twitchy and on-edge. It breaks Yuuji's heart to see him like this. He's always been the smart one out of their little group of three, the brain to Yuuji and Kugisaki's brawn. Not that he's not still smart. It's just that he's always half-zoned out, like he's perpetually caught in a daydream.

But that's fine. Yuuji's here to help him remember the things that slip out of his grasp. They eat all their meals together, so Yuuji writes down the time and what Megumi ate in case he forgets. He puts up little signs on the walls to direct Megumi to the places he visits often, like the kitchen or his room. And when Megumi comes to him with a pinched expression, asking for clarification on memories that may or may not exist, Yuuji is always happy to tell him what was real.

From what Yuuji can gather, Sukuna...*did* something. He did something to Megumi that he never did to Yuuji—something that pushed Megumi's soul right to the very bottom of his body. It must have had something to do with water, because the first time Ieiri tries to get Megumi to sit down for a sponge bath—his legs are too weak for a shower after he spent a month in bed—he panics so badly that she has to sedate him. Yuuji's called in to help him with his showers after that, since he refuses to take baths.

Megumi hates it. He's embarrassed. He yells at Yuuji the first couple of times, insisting that he can do it himself, but then he nearly slips and cracks his head open on the tile and Ieiri makes it clear that help is non-negotiable.

It's not weird. Yuuji is determined to make it not-weird. He helps hold Megumi up and turns the water as hot as he can handle, because if it's too cold then Megumi freezes up and starts breathing funny. Then he hands Megumi the soap and lets him do his own thing. Sometimes Megumi's fingers spasm and he can't hold things right, so Yuuji will help him wash his hair and scrub the soap out of his ears. He worries, at first, that Megumi will notice all the new scars on Yuuji's body, but then he realises that Megumi spends most of the shower with his eyes shut tight.

Ieiri says that he's getting used to having a body again, which is easily the most horrifying thing Yuuji's ever heard. Yuuji makes it his job to dry Megumi off after each shower with the nicest, fluffiest towel he can find, and he watches Megumi startle when it brushes his skin.

Yuuji wishes he could wrap his arms around Megumi and hold him until his brain kicks back into gear and reminds him that he can be touched.

One night, as they're watching a movie, Megumi turns to Yuuji to say something and freezes.

Yuuji glances at him. They're sitting on opposite ends of the couch, their legs thrown over each other. "What's up?"

Megumi is silent for a moment. Then: "Your face," he says, his voice brittle. He taps the right side of his own face, where Yuuji's new scars are. "What happened?"

Yuuji's eye, he's found, is one of the most common things for Megumi to forget. Sometimes he'll be talking to Yuuji, and then he'll turn around and freeze at the sight. Yuuji knows it's a shock. He doesn't wear a patch like Kugisaki, doesn't like how it rubs against his skin, so the gnarly scarring's on full display. He keeps bumping into countertops; Kugisaki makes fun of him for it like she doesn't have the exact same problem.

The light from the television flickers over them, blue and liminal.

"I fought Sukuna," Yuuji tells him simply. Megumi goes still. He blinks, and recognition dawns over his face. With a shuddering breath, he draws his legs up, no longer touching Yuuji's.

"Right," he says dully. Yuuji, out of some instinct to not let him go far away, lurches forward and grabs his ankle.

"It's okay," he says. "It doesn't matter."

"It's your *eye."*

"I'm alive, aren't I?"

"Stop *saying* things like that," Megumi snaps, yanking his leg out of Yuuji's grasp. "You're alive, but that doesn't mean I didn't do anything to you. I almost—"

"You didn't do anything," Yuuji says firmly. "Sukuna did."

Megumi snorts. "You're one to talk."

"That's different."

"How?"

Yuuji's thought about this a thousand times, so he has his answer ready. "I had a responsibility. I should've protected you from—"

"You *did,"* Megumi says, and that steals the words right out of Yuuji's throat. "You—" He swallows, his eyes flitting over Yuuji's scarred face. "You did."

Yuuji stares at him. He's not entirely sure what Megumi's talking about. When did Yuuji protect him the way he should've? He let Megumi get possessed. He let Megumi be suppressed by Sukuna for a month and a half. It took him dozens of timelines to finally figure out how to get Megumi out alive. Yuuji...

Yuuji hasn't protected him at *all.*

"Itadori," Megumi says. *Itadori,* again. Not *Yuuji.* He switches between the two depending on how much he remembers. Yuuji shakes his head.

"Can we not talk about this right now?" he pleads. "Just watch the movie?"

Megumi frowns at him, folding his legs beneath him to sit cross-legged. Yuuji puts his hands together and pouts. "Please?"

Megumi sighs. "Fine," he says, turning back to the screen. "Not that I know what's going on, anyway."

Yuuji takes the opportunity to rapid-fire explain the plot so far. Megumi listens quietly, not interrupting.

They watch the movie. They don't talk. And, to Yuuji's disappointment, the tension between them remains.

Megumi starts walking on Yuuji's right.

At first, Yuuji doesn't notice. But then he realises that he hasn't bumped into anything in a while, because every now and then, Megumi will pull at his elbow or nudge him out of the way of something. He never says anything about it, so Yuuji doesn't either. He just watches Megumi and waits for a day when Megumi forgets again, and walks on his left instead.

That day never comes. Megumi always remembers that Yuuji's right eye is injured. He also starts calling Yuuji by his first name more regularly. *Itadori* starts appearing less and less, until it doesn't appear at all.

Yuuji dares to hope.

Slowly, as the months pass, Megumi's memory starts improving. Yuuji takes down the signs on the walls, because now Megumi can navigate around the school just as easily as he did before Sukuna. He starts remembering what Yuuji's favourite dishes to cook are. One time, he points out that Kugisaki is wearing a skirt that she wore just last week. He starts walking with Yuuji on his left and Kugisaki on his right. Yuuji thinks it's cute, like they're a little three-wheeled machine. Anyone who sees them knows that they come as a package.

Almost eight months after Shinjuku, Megumi gets cleared by Ieiri.

Yuuji hears the news from Kugisaki. He's just come back from a mission, and he kind of stinks with sweat, but he runs to Megumi's room anyway. He knocks on the door, a rapid one-two-three, his heart quick like a rabbit in his chest.

Megumi swings the door open. He's dressed in his comfy clothes, and Yuuji wants to hug him so badly it hurts. He settles for rocking back on his heels instead, grinning.

"So," he says. "I heard you got cleared."

"I did," Megumi acknowledges, stepping aside to let Yuuji into his room. Yuuji walks in and sees a book lying on the rumpled bed. "Ieiri-san says my memory's almost fully recovered."

"Almost?" Yuuji asks, plopping down in Megumi's desk chair as Megumi sits on the bed.

Megumi looks up, meeting Yuuji's gaze. "There are some things she couldn't confirm for me," he says simply. "Because she wasn't there."

And Yuuji knows, from the look in his eye and the tone of his voice, exactly what he's talking about.

When Yuuji opened his Domain, no one else had entered. From the outside, it would've looked like a black dome. The only people who know what happened inside are Yuuji, Megumi and Sukuna, and Sukuna, obviously, is dead.

Yuuji swallows. "You can ask me," he offers. "I can tell you if you're remembering right."

"Alright," Megumi says, drawing his legs up to his chest. He looks at Yuuji for a moment, something meaningful in his gaze that Yuuji can't pick out.

"You opened a Domain," Megumi says, testing the waters. Yuuji grins at him and holds up all his fingers.

"Ten points!" he crows. Megumi snorts.

"Take this seriously," he says, but there's no real heat behind it. His eyes linger pointedly on Yuuji's left hand, and the stumps of his ring and pinky fingers. "Also, that's eight. Not ten."

"You know what I meant," Yuuji says, sticking out his tongue. "Anyway, keep going."

Megumi clears his throat. "It looked like your hometown."

Yuuji wiggles his fingers. "Twenty points!"

"Sixteen."

"Twenty. It's the spirit of it. Next one."

Megumi's barely-there smile falters. "I talked to you," he says, glancing away. "You told me about your grandfather."

Yuuji's breath hitches. It's a roundabout way of confirming what Yuuji *really* said to Megumi in that moment: *I can't tell you to keep living.* Megumi's eyes flicker up to meet his, then look away again, a flash of green.

Yuuji clears his throat, lowering his hands. "Thirty points," he says hoarsely. Megumi doesn't correct him again. "Next one."

Megumi looks down, studying the corner of his blanket intently. "I was a kid," he says quietly. "And you met me in an alleyway."

Yuuji feels like the breath's been punched out of him. Again: Megumi's saying things without really saying them. *You met me in an alleyway,* he says, like the alleyway was the most important part of that conversation.

"Megumi," Yuuji says, his voice cracking.

"Just tell me if it happened or not," Megumi bites out. Yuuji chews on his own cheek and nods.

Megumi looks at him. Takes a deep breath.

"You saved me," he says, and Yuuji snaps his head up.

"No," he says instinctively, and Megumi's face contorts into a scowl. "No, I didn't. Not really. *Megumi.* Don't look at me like—"

"When are you going to stop with this?" Megumi snaps. "Yuuji, you *did.* You saved me. Why is that so hard for you to understand?"

"Because I *didn't,"* Yuuji insists. "You saved *yourself."*

"Only because of you!" Megumi snaps, and Yuuji goes silent.

He gapes at Megumi for a moment. Megumi's glaring at him, but as the silence stretches on, his expression clears.

"...Yuuji." He shifts, leaning forward. "Did you not know?"

Yuuji opens his mouth and says nothing. He just—he *can't.* He knows what happened in his Domain. Megumi knows what happened in his Domain. The weight of it hangs between them, dragging them down.

Megumi had wanted to die. Yuuji had offered it to him. And Megumi had refused, because...because...

"Yuuji," Megumi says quietly. "You told me you'd be lonely without me."

Yuuji flushes. It's different when it's said out loud like this, in the real world. It's different when it's *Megumi* saying it, when Megumi's proving that he really did hear Yuuji back then.

"Yeah," Yuuji admits. "I did say that."

"And you still don't get why I stayed?" Megumi asks, in a voice that makes it clear that the words *you idiot* are supposed to be tacked onto the end.

Yuuji throws up his hands. "I don't know!" he cries out. "I thought I just—got through to you somehow!"

"Got through to me," Megumi repeats derisively. "And *how* do you think you got through to me, dumbass?"

Yuuji splutters out a bunch of sounds that aren't anywhere near words. Megumi's eye twitches. He slides off the bed and stalks towards Yuuji, towering over him in the chair. Yuuji shrinks back, his heart racing.

"Tell me if I'm remembering this right," Megumi says. He reaches out and cups the right side of Yuuji's face. Yuuji can barely feel it through the scar tissue, but he feels like he's burning up anyway. "Yuuji."

Yuuji stares up at him. "What?" he wheezes.

"You love me," Megumi says, calm as a glass sea. He holds Yuuji's gaze. "Yes?"

Oh. So Megumi *did* hear everything that Yuuji didn't say, back there in his Domain. Yuuji coughs. There's no shame in admitting it, but he still feels a little embarrassed.

"Yeah," he says.

"In what ways?"

Yuuji swallows. "All of them," he whispers. Confesses. "I think. Is that okay?"

As long as love exists, Yuuji will hold it for Megumi. That's just how he works now. He can't function without this love. Even if Megumi died, it would just turn to grief—but it would be there nonetheless. Megumi's made a home for himself in Yuuji's soul, and Yuuji's never gonna get him out.

Megumi's mouth curls up. A half-smile. "It's okay," he says, and Yuuji's eyes widen. "I think I'm the same. That's why I stayed."

Oh.

Oh.

Yuuji knew. Somewhere deep down, he knew. It was impossible not to, especially after that last timeline in Tachikawa put the possibility in his head. But still—having Megumi look at him like this, even after Yuuji failed him, even when Tsumiki and Gojo are both dead...

Yuuji tips himself forward. His head thunks against Megumi's chest, right where the Black Flash scar is. He winds his arms around Megumi's waist and pulls him in close.

"I love you," he says, muffled in Megumi's shirt, because if he doesn't say it now then he'll explode and die. Megumi's hand comes up and brushes through his hair. Yuuji doesn't expect him to say it back, and sure enough, Megumi's quiet for a while. Yuuji pushes his face further into Megumi's chest and repeats it, so quiet he doesn't even know if Megumi can hear him. He just needs to say it. He just needs to get it out there.

But then he feels Megumi shift, and there's a light pressure on top of his head. A kiss.

"I love you too," Megumi mumbles. Yuuji's eyes prickle with tears. "And...thank you."

He doesn't say what for, but he doesn't need to. Yuuji knows. He might not agree, but he knows what Megumi thinks. This time, he doesn't argue.

If Megumi, at least, thinks that Yuuji saved him—well, then. Maybe that's enough.

They don't kiss the night that they confess. They just hold each other, taking comfort in the fact that the other person's *there.* Yuuji stays the night in Megumi's room, keeping his arms wrapped tight around Megumi's torso.

In the morning, Yuuji wakes up first. He blinks awake right as the sun is rising, a pale yellow light sliding into the room. Megumi is curled up against his chest. He tends to sleep like that, Yuuji's found—where Yuuji usually splays his limbs out like a starfish, Megumi curls up into the tightest ball possible. It's adorable.

Megumi's not a morning person. He doesn't stir until long after the sun's come up. Yuuji doesn't mind. He stays right there in bed, watching him, marvelling at every breath, every twitch of his fingers. Megumi is here and he's alive and he loves Yuuji enough to stay.

When Megumi *does* finally wake up, he cracks his eyes open and squints at Yuuji.

"Good morning," Yuuji says, giddy. Megumi groans.

"Wha' time 'sit?" he mumbles. Yuuji reaches over his head to check the time on his phone.

"Early," he says, because he knows that if he says the real time Megumi won't register it at all. His brain doesn't start working until after breakfast. "We can stay a bit longer."

Megumi yawns hard enough to make his jaw crack. "Wake me when you get up," he murmurs, dropping his head into the crook of Yuuji's neck. Yuuji smooths a hand down his back, then splays his hand out between Megumi's shoulder blades. He's warm.

Then Megumi reaches up, his hand fumbling around for Yuuji's face. "Oi," he grumbles, and Yuuji bites back a smile. "Where're you?"

"I'm here, I'm—*hey,* that was my nose—"

"Stop moving," Megumi orders, even though Yuuji hasn't moved an inch. His hand grabs the back of Yuuji's hair, and Yuuji winces at the sharp tug of pain—only then he can't focus on anything at all, because Megumi is dragging his head down and—

Megumi presses their mouths together in a kiss. Firm, chaste, closed lips. Slightly off-centre, because Megumi's eyes are closed; he's clearly still half-asleep. Yuuji stares at him, frozen, and doesn't dare move.

Megumi releases him. "There," he says, like that was something they just *do.* He yawns again. "G'morning. Go back to sleep."

And then he just—flops back over. His hair tickles Yuuji's nose. Yuuji stares straight ahead, his brain short-circuiting, until he finally catches up with what's just happened.

"What—Megumi. *Megumi.* Hey." He prods at Megumi's motionless form. "What the hell, man? You can't just do that!"

Megumi doesn't respond. He's out like a light. Yuuji gapes at him.

"You're unbelievable, you know that?" he tells him. "That was our first kiss. Our *first kiss!"*

(It's not really, not for Yuuji. But in this timeline, with this Megumi, it is, and that makes it all the more special.)

When Megumi wakes up later—really, truly wakes up, conscious and all—he doesn't even remember it. What's worse, he doesn't even *believe* Yuuji.

"I wouldn't do that," he says suspiciously as he buttons up his uniform. "You were probably dreaming."

"I was *not,"* Yuuji says, offended. "You kissed me! You stole our first kiss!"

"Doesn't count if it didn't happen."

"But it *did."*

"Prove it," Megumi says, because he's an asshole. Yuuji groans and throws himself back onto the bed.

"I'm in love with the meanest person on earth," he tells the ceiling. Over by the wardrobe, Megumi's fingers stutter on his buttons; Yuuji grins to himself. "He says our first kiss didn't *count."*

The mattress dips by Yuuji's head. He looks up to find Megumi kneeling next to him, a determined glint in his eye.

"Fine," he says, gripping Yuuji by the jaw. *"This* one counts, then."

He leans down and kisses Yuuji again. This one, Yuuji thinks, is even better than the first, because it lasts long enough that he gets to kiss back.

Megumi catches Yuuji off-guard on a day out in September, just a few weeks after their first kiss. It's a cool day, cold enough that Yuuji had ended up taking off his hoodie right there on the sidewalk so he could hand it over to Megumi, and they've spent the last few hours just sort of basking in each other's company. They had breakfast at a café Yuuji's had on his to-do list for ages, and after that, Megumi had ducked into a bookstore to see if it had a title he's been after for a while. It didn't; Yuuji had kissed the tip of his nose to make up for it.

Now, they're just sitting on the wall of a small public garden, watching the people pass them by. They'd had a stupid little stand-off earlier, when Megumi kept trying to sit on Yuuji's right and Yuuji kept moving to his other side. In the last few weeks, it's become a bit of a running joke: Megumi always wants to be on Yuuji's bad side so he can keep an eye out for threats. Yuuji always wants Megumi to be on his good side so he can keep an eye on Megumi. Today, Yuuji has won; Megumi sits on his left, and Yuuji smugly makes as much eye contact as he can. Which, as it turns out, is a lot—at least, until Yuuji instinctively reaches out to intertwine their hands, and Megumi looks away.

Yuuji frowns. "Dude."

"We're dating. Don't call me that," Megumi says, so fast that it has to be automatic. He hasn't taken his hand away from Yuuji's, but he's suddenly sitting much stiffer than he was a second ago. Yuuji feels a tiny flash of concern.

"Okay, then." He scoots closer. To his relief, Megumi doesn't move away. "Megumi. What's up?"

Megumi's looking straight ahead. Not at the people, not even at the pavement, but just...ahead. He's not really looking at anything in particular. Something cold trickles into Yuuji's stomach.

Megumi takes a deep breath, then turns to look at him.

"Yuuji," he says. He says Yuuji's name so softly compared to everything else, like he's holding a glass ball in his mouth. It makes Yuuji feel like something precious.

"Right here," Yuuji says, squeezing Megumi's hand. Megumi looks down, brushing his thumb over the remains of Yuuji's ring finger and pinky.

"Earlier, when you gave me your hoodie," he says. "Your shirt rode up a little."

Yuuji tilts his head at him. "...Yeah? Sorry, was that, like, indecent or something? Did I flash someone's grandma by mistake?" He can't help but grin a little, swaying sideways to nudge Megumi teasingly. "Did you see something *untoward?"*

"No," Megumi says, his eyes flicking up to meet Yuuji's. "But I did see some scars."

Yuuji freezes.

Oh, shit.

"I've seen them before," Megumi continues. "On your stomach and your chest."

Yuuji's brain is all static. He—he must've slipped, at some point. He must have forgotten that he has things to hide. He and Megumi have been glued at the hip for the last month—it's not really a stretch to think that, at some point, between the cuddles and the training sessions and that time Yuuji got injured on a mission two weeks ago, that Megumi has seen him shirtless.

Yuuji swallows. "Uh, yeah," he says. "What about them?"

Megumi taps his thumb against the stub of Yuuji's severed pinky. "Well," he says, and his voice is so calm that Yuuji knows he must be forcing it, "I just don't remember you having that many before Shinjuku. I wanted to ask how you got them."

"It's nothing," Yuuji says quickly. He says it *too* quickly, because Megumi's eyes snap to him again, and this time they narrow with suspicion. "Seriously, Megumi, you don't have to—"

"Was it me?"

Yuuji stares. Megumi stares back, unyielding. In the sunlight, the scars on his face are stark.

"Huh?" Yuuji manages to say.

Megumi's eyes tighten around the edges. "Was it me?" he repeats, and—and—

Yuuji almost says yes.

Yes—yes, they were all you. This one was you when you died in my arms. This one was you when I found your body in the rubble. This one was you when you died somewhere far away from me and I never knew what happened. This one was you when you saved me.

But that's not what Megumi means. What he means is: *did I do that?* He looks down at Yuuji's missing fingers again, his mouth twisting unhappily. They're nine months down the line and he still doesn't trust his own memory. Yuuji can't stand that, so he catches Megumi's hand in his own and brings it to his lips, kissing the backs of his fingers.

"It's a long story," he says, "but you didn't do it to me. I did it to myself. Don't worry about it."

Megumi's eyes narrow even further. Ah, fuck. Wrong thing to say.

"You did it to *yourself?"* he asks skeptically. Before Yuuji can stop him, he reaches out to tug Yuuji's collar down, exposing the long line across his throat. "Did you decapitate yourself?"

Yuuji splutters, grabbing his collar and yanking it back up. "No, I just—I mean—you know, missions, here and there—"

"You've never been struck by lightning on a mission," Megumi says matter-of-factly, his eyes dropping to Yuuji's shoulder, where Jacob's Ladder left a Lichtenberg figure that's currently covered by Yuuji's shirt. "And you've never had your head cut off. *And* you can use Reverse Cursed Technique now, so your wounds usually heal without scarring." He looks Yuuji dead in the eye. "You got most of those scars before or during Shinjuku."

Yuuji's mouth goes dry. Shit. He'd almost forgotten how smart Megumi is, how analytical. Of course he'd figure it out. He probably figured it out months ago—or he would've, if he hadn't been forgetting things every other second.

Yuuji opens his mouth, then shuts it again, like a fish. Just—what can he even say? How does he start?

The silence between them stretches on, filled only by the ambient sound of dozens of people passing them by. Megumi watches Yuuji intently, the furrow in his brow growing deeper with every second where Yuuji doesn't respond.

If Yuuji keeps the Vow a secret, then Megumi will understand. If he tells Megumi, right here and right now, that he doesn't want to explain the scars to him, then Megumi will let it go. But, at the same time, Yuuji can see the way Megumi's eyes shutter the longer the silence goes on. And Yuuji remembers, suddenly, standing in an alleyway in the light of a setting sun, looking down at a six-year-old Megumi and finding nothing but caution in his green eyes.

In that moment, Yuuji had realised that he's never told Megumi the truth. He'd realised that there's been no timeline where he's come clean about the Vow.

...Maybe this should be the one. No—this *has* to be the one. Yuuji refuses to consider the idea that there could ever be another timeline after this, because another timeline means Megumi is dead.

Yuuji looses a breath. He tilts his head forward, rests it against Megumi's shoulder. He opens his mouth, tries to dredge up the words, and finds that nothing comes out.

He can't say it. He *should,* but he can't. Here, on this random street in Tokyo, surrounded by strangers who they'll never see again, Yuuji can't say a word. He suspects that, even if they were alone right now, he still wouldn't be able to get out so much as a whisper.

He swallows. Tightens his grip on Megumi's hand.

"I'll tell you," he says into Megumi's hoodie. Well, technically it's Yuuji's hoodie. "I promise I will. Just...not now. Or for a while. Can I—can we do that?"

Megumi's silent for a moment. Yuuji can practically hear the cogs turning in his head. Just based off this alone, he'll know that the scars are something bad for Yuuji. He'll know that it's something Yuuji has to *think* about before he talks about it.

"Okay," Megumi finally says, and Yuuji slumps against him in relief. "If that's what you want, then...okay. We can do that. I can wait."

Yuuji turns his face into Megumi's neck. "Thank you," he says quietly, and Megumi just tilts his head to press a kiss to Yuuji's hair.

He can wait. They can wait. After all, they've got time.

Yuuji goes a long time without saying it.

The first anniversary of Shibuya passes, then Shinjuku. Japan is rebuilding itself, slowly. The jujutsu world has changed—cursed spirits are public knowledge now, and there's a whole slew of government and legal stuff that goes over Yuuji's head. He's got nothing to do with it. All he knows is that now, when he goes places, he has to show his brand-new sorcerer's license, and he has to tell people he's a sorcerer. He gets weird looks for it—some people scatter when they hear the word 'sorcerer', and there are a few who even hold up protective charms against Yuuji like *he's* a curse—but, at the very least, no one asks questions about his eye or his face. Everyone knows what happened to sorcerers in Shinjuku last year.

Megumi, as the head of the Zen'in clan, still gets drawn into politics, even though his clan's basically just him and Maki now. He hates it. Every time he gets called into a meeting, he makes Maki go with him, and then he comes back to Yuuji with his face like thunder and his black dog weaving agitated circles around his legs.

Every now and again, when Yuuji's shirtless in his vicinity, Megumi's eyes will linger on his scars.

"Not yet?" he'll ask quietly. Always quiet. Always gentle, or as gentle as Megumi can be. He knows, of course, that it's a bad topic for Yuuji, and he really, truly doesn't want to push. Yuuji loves him for it. He'll always shake his head, pull Megumi in closer, kiss him softly to show that he appreciates the patience.

"Not yet," Yuuji will say, and Megumi will nod, and they go right back to how they were before.

Things get worse once Megumi starts going on missions again. Yuuji gets antsy whenever Megumi's not in his direct line of sight, but, for the first few weeks, the higher-ups are cautious about assigning him things. They keep him limited to low-grade curses, pairing him with Kugisaki, who's also been out of commission for a while on account of her hand-eye coordination being thrown completely out of wack by her missing eye. So, at first, Yuuji thinks he can deal with it.

Then Megumi gets paired up with *Yuuji.* They're assigned to take down a Grade Two. And Yuuji...does not handle it very well.

That's an understatement. Yuuji handles it terribly.

It's the first mission they've had with each other since Shinjuku, which seems impossible, since it's been over a year. Yuuji will admit that he goes a little crazy—he keeps seeing ghosts around every corner, keeps thinking Megumi will slip through his hands. Throughout the entire mission, he keeps wondering if his Binding Vow is still active. If Megumi dies now, will Yuuji still get sent back in time? Or will he be forced to live without him?

He knows he's acting overprotective. He knows he's being annoying and overbearing, especially when he insists on being the first to check around every corner and open every door. Megumi actually makes him stop halfway through the mission just to hit him upside the head and tell him he's being an idiot.

"I'm the one with the curse-tracking shikigami," he points out, his eye visibly twitching with annoyance. As if to prove his point, Kon materialises out of the shadows, sniffing around for the curse's residuals. Yuuji doesn't know how to tell him that the reason he's like this is because every time he blinks, he sees a timeline where Megumi is dead.

When the curse shows up, it's even worse.

It's not the same curse that appeared at Tachikawa North High School #4. That would be damn near impossible. But it looks similar enough, all tall and thin, and when it lunges for Megumi with its mouth wide open—

Yuuji freaks out, to say the least.

He shoves Megumi down a flight of stairs. Not his best moment, as a best friend or a boyfriend, but all he'd been thinking at the time was that he needed to get Megumi *away.* The curse ends up latching onto Yuuji's side instead, its teeth digging into the soft flesh of his belly, and he hears Megumi yell.

Then Kon comes bounding in and bites the curse's head off. Slightly embarrassing for Yuuji. *Very* infuriating for Megumi. He chews Yuuji out for it all the way back to the school, even though Yuuji heals the wound in like five seconds flat.

But then things like that keep happening. They just...they *keep happening.* Yuuji can't help it. Every time Megumi gets within a ten-kilometre-radius of danger, Yuuji starts feeling like he'll break out in hives. He gets twitchy, on-edge. He keeps expecting something terrible to happen. He half-expects Kenjaku to come popping out of nowhere, ready to cut Megumi down and send Yuuji back in time yet again.

The third time Yuuji drags himself to Ieiri after a mission with Megumi, she just raises her brows at him. "What'd you do this time?" she asks, as Yuuji shrugs off his shirt to give her access to the claw marks he'd been sluggishly healing on the way back. He doesn't have nearly enough cursed energy left to heal it on his own, which is why Megumi had made him promise to come to Ieiri anyway. After he yelled at Yuuji for being an overprotective idiot, of course.

Yuuji winces. "Jumped off the roof so I could cover him," he mumbles, as Ieiri presses her palm against his back and the claw marks start stitching themselves up. "He said I was lucky I didn't break a leg, too."

"He's right," Ieiri says frankly. "Which is why you should tell him."

Yuuji sighs. She's been on his ass about it since she figured out why Yuuji pulls crazy stunts like this every time he's on a mission with Megumi, and now she thinks Yuuji should just tell Megumi about the Vow and 'put you both out of your misery'.

(Ieiri has a way of speech that makes it sound like she's always talking about a pet that needs to be put down. Yuuji finds it slightly disturbing.)

"I *will* tell him," Yuuji protests, and Ieiri doesn't so much as bat an eye. "Just...not now."

"He'd probably stop calling you a—what was it?"

"An overprotective idiot," Yuuji says glumly.

"He'd stop calling you that if you just told him," Ieiri says pointedly, drawing her hand away from Yuuji's newly-healed wounds. Yuuji looks down at his feet.

"I'll think about it," he lies. Ieiri sighs and lets him go.

The thing is. The thing *is*.

The thing is: Yuuji wants to tell Megumi, but Yuuji is also ashamed.

How can he look Megumi in the eyes and tell him that he failed to save him so many times? Megumi has made it clear that he doesn't think Yuuji has anything to apologise for, but he doesn't know what Yuuji's done. If Megumi knew...

Well, it probably wouldn't change Megumi's opinion of him. He's stubborn like that. It's one of the things Yuuji likes about him. But Yuuji just doesn't know if he could handle it if Megumi knew and still believed that Yuuji didn't have to apologise.

Yuuji's guilty. He will always be guilty. He failed Megumi so badly he doesn't know if he can ever forgive himself. He knows that he should tell Megumi about the Vow. He *knows*. He's promised both himself and Megumi that he'll do it. But it's so hard to even try and figure out where to start, because Yuuji knows that, the moment he tells Megumi about the Binding Vow, Megumi will try to convince Yuuji it's not his fault. Megumi will try to help him shoulder the blame, because, against his better interests, Megumi loves him back.

Yuuji *will* tell him, but he just...keeps putting it off. Not now. Not later. Sometime in the undefinable future, Yuuji will telepathically beam the information into his head or something. He'll wait for the day where suddenly, magically, the wound no longer feels so raw. He'll wait until he can talk about it without feeling his throat start to close, his pulse start to race. He'll wait until he stops feeling like it will kill him to remember it.

So: the months pass. Yuuji doesn't tell him.

They settle into a routine. It's frighteningly similar to how they were in the timeline where they weren't sorcerers—they cook together, wash their clothes together, do all their chores together. All the boring, mundane parts of life become much less boring when they're shared.

Kugisaki—no, she's Nobara now, they're past the family names—calls them 'grossly domestic'. Yuuji rolls his eyes at her, but he has to admit she's right. He and Megumi exist so easily together that it almost scares him. At the same time, though, it makes him feel like he could do anything, if only he had Megumi by his side.

That's why, when Yuuji returns to Sendai the summer after his seventeenth birthday, he asks Megumi to come with him.

In this timeline, it's the first time he's gone back since becoming a sorcerer. He'd missed the first anniversary of his grandfather's death—Megumi had still been having issues with his memory at that point, and the date had completely slipped Yuuji's mind. He makes up for it this time with extra flowers and other offerings, like some favourite foods his grandpa had been forced to stop eating by the end. He introduces Megumi, who bows awkwardly, and tries not to laugh as he imagines his grandfather and Megumi meeting in real life. They would've hated each other, probably. Like two stray cats trying to see who could hiss the loudest. Yuuji would've loved to see it.

He boxes up a few of the things he left in the house the first time around. Gojo didn't exactly give Yuuji a lot of time to pack when he whisked him off to go be a sorcerer, so this time, he takes the sentimental things. It's scarily similar to how he packed for Tokyo in the last timeline. He takes all the same things: the photos, the drawings, the 'good' knife. He takes the cassettes, too, which Megumi notices.

"You need a player for those," he says, and Yuuji's heart twists in his chest. "Did your grandfather have one?"

Yuuji digs past the other cassettes and pulls out the old player. "It broke a few years back," he says, tossing it to Megumi to inspect. "I'll just grab a new one when I remember."

Megumi turns the broken player over in his hands. Yuuji watches him and feels his throat go tight. This, he realises, is probably exactly what Megumi looked like in that secondhand shop in Akihabara, when he bought the player for Yuuji. Yuuji had never ended up using that player. Megumi spent his money for nothing.

"You can just throw that away," he tells Megumi, turning away before he can start crying. Megumi hums in acknowledgment, then comes around to help Yuuji pack his pictures so that the frames aren't at risk of breaking.

Yuuji doesn't think much of it until his eighteenth birthday rolls around. They have a small party at the school. Nothing major, nothing loud, just a cake and some presents and Okkotsu video-calling in from Germany or wherever the hell he is now. Nobara, apparently, had been the one to organise most of it, which explains why she's running around yelling even more than normal.

"Turns out she's a control freak," Megumi murmurs to Yuuji. They're both watching Nobara death-glare Inumaki as he carries Yuuji's cake into the common room. "She got us banned from three different bakeries."

"Banned?" Yuuji asks, holding back a laugh. "How do you get banned from a *bakery?"*

"She said the icing wasn't 'oomph' enough, whatever that means. I think one of the bakeries put her photo up on the wall as a reminder to never serve her again."

In front of them, Inumaki sets the cake down safely, and everyone breathes a sigh of relief. Nobara clears her throat.

"Yuuji!" she barks, pointing towards the cake. "Get in the centre for the photo!"

Megumi nudges Yuuji forward, the ghost of a shit-eating grin flitting across his face. Yuuji rolls his eyes, kisses him on the cheek, then goes to subject himself to Nobara's mini birthday boy photoshoot. It isn't until the candles have nearly burnt down that she finally relents, and they all crowd together for one last group photo before Yuuji blows the candles out.

It's a perfect birthday. There are some people missing, of course; Gojo's absence, even two and a half years after Shinjuku, is a glaring wound. Nanami, too, and even Yuuji's grandpa. Even *Choso,* who Yuuji suspects would've become just as much of a control freak over his birthday as Nobara. But all the people Yuuji loves are here, and they're all safe, and that's really the most that he can ask for.

Megumi finds him in the kitchen after the party's over. The others are either dozing on the couch or sleeping in their rooms; they'd been planning on cleaning up in the morning, but Yuuji is wide awake right now, so he'd figured he might as well get a head start. He's putting away clean dishes when Megumi comes in, quiet as a cat.

"Nobara would have an aneurysm if she saw you," he says, reaching out to take a dish out of Yuuji's hands. "You're not meant to be doing work today."

"What she doesn't know won't hurt her," Yuuji says, turning around to peck Megumi's forehead. As much as he loves kissing Megumi's mouth, he thinks it's these little offhanded kisses that he likes the most: tiny bursts of affection, like mini fireworks of love. Dropping a kiss on Megumi's brow or cheek or nose just because he can. Megumi's reactions are always cute, too. Like now, for example: he scrunches up his brow a little, and Yuuji can't help but duck in to kiss it again.

"Yuuji." Megumi gently pushes him back. "Hold on. I have something to give you."

"Hm?" Yuuji looks down, and it's then that he sees the box in Megumi's hands. It's fairly thin, not too big, wrapped in simple red wrapping paper. "Aww, really? For me?"

Megumi narrows his eyes at him. "I'm insulted that you sound so surprised."

"No, I'm just happy! I like it when you think of me."

"I always think of you," Megumi says, before promptly going red at the ears. Obviously not something he planned to say, then. Yuuji grins, leaning in to press a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

"Well, thank you," he says softly, taking the box from Megumi. "I thought you put your gift on the table with everyone else."

Megumi shakes his head. "I didn't want to give it to you in front of the others, in case you...well." He clears his throat. "You'll see why."

"Don't tell me it's naughty," Yuuji says, wiggling his eyebrows. Megumi swats him over the head.

"No," he hisses, and Yuuji laughs quietly. "Just open it."

"I'm just saying, it's the right size and shape for a DVD..."

"Yuuji."

Yuuji snickers. "Alright, alright. Sorry. You know that'd be weird, anyway." He peels back the wrapping paper and finds a plain cardboard box. He lifts the lid.

His brain goes blank.

"I took your grandpa's one from Sendai. I tried getting it repaired, but they said they couldn't, so I found a new one instead," Megumi's saying, but Yuuji hears him like he's underwater. "I kept the original, don't worry. I...hope that's okay."

Yuuji stares down at the cassette player and feels like the world is collapsing around him. It's the same player. It's the *exact same player.* The same player his grandfather had. The same player that Megumi bought for him in another world, a world that was both incredible and awful. The same player that Gojo had handed to him at Megumi's wake.

He doesn't realise he's crying until Megumi wipes the tears away.

"Yuuji?" Megumi's hand is tap-tap-tapping at his cheek, a little frantic. "Yuuji. Hey. Are you okay? Did I overstep?"

Yuuji shakes his head. No, Megumi hasn't overstepped. It's just...it's just...

He looks up at Megumi, and he sees nothing but confusion in his eyes. He's got no idea why the player's affecting Yuuji like this. He doesn't know that, in another timeline, he'd died before he ever got to give this gift to Yuuji himself. He doesn't know that Yuuji had once sat on the train from Kyoto to Tokyo and sobbed over it. He doesn't know *anything,* because Yuuji hasn't told him.

And Yuuji—Yuuji *wants* to tell him.

It's Megumi. In every single timeline, no matter how far back Yuuji had gone, Megumi had still been *Megumi.* At his core, he's been the same in every universe, the same boy that Yuuji loves. And Yuuji, in return, has been the same boy that *Megumi* loves. It's the only explanation for how something like this could happen: Megumi, in two different timelines, giving Yuuji the exact same gift for the exact same occasion.

The Megumi standing in front of him now is, technically speaking, the same Megumi who died in Tachikawa. He's the same Megumi who died in Sendai, in Shibuya, in Shinjuku, and he deserves to know. Yuuji wants to tell him. Yuuji wants to get rid of this secret between

them, wants to clear the air. He'll bare all his failures and his shame to Megumi, and it will be *okay,* because Megumi loves him.

Megumi's watching him, his eyes dark with worry. His hands are still on Yuuji's face, his thumb brushing away the last of Yuuji's drying tears. Yuuji breathes in for four seconds, out for six, then slowly sets the cassette player down on the counter. He reaches up and gently tugs Megumi's hands away from his face.

"Megumi," he says, his tongue clumsy in his mouth. "I need to tell you something."

Megumi's face drops immediately. He yanks his hands out of Yuuji's grasp to grip Yuuji's arms instead, and Yuuji practically melts into the touch, curling himself around Megumi like a weed.

"Yuuji, what—"

"It's not bad," Yuuji says quickly. Megumi relaxes, a tiny bit. "It's, um...you remember my scars? The ones you keep asking me about?"

For a moment, Megumi stops breathing. They're standing close enough that Yuuji can feel it, the stop and stutter of his chest.

"Yuuji," Megumi murmurs, his voice hoarse. "You don't have to—"

"I want to," Yuuji interrupts. "But I—can I..."

He winds his arms around Megumi's waist and pulls him in close, burying his face in Megumi's neck. Megumi's hands run up his back, a soothing repeating loop over his spine.

"Can I tell you like this?" Yuuji pleads. "I can't..."

I can't look you in the eyes right now.

Megumi nods. Yuuji feels it, feels Megumi's hair tickle his cheek with the motion. "Take your time," Megumi tells him softly.

Yuuji takes a deep, shuddering breath. Feels his ribs expand with it, feels his lungs inflate. There are a thousand things he could say right now. He could keep it short, like when he told Ieiri, but that won't convey everything that Yuuji needs to say. After all, Ieiri's not the one who Yuuji watched die a hundred times. Megumi is.

He just has to say it. Come on, Yuuji, just say it. Just say it, just say it, just *say it*—

"ImadeaBindingVow," he blurts out, all in one breath, because if he gives himself more than a heartbeat to think about it he's pretty sure he'll chicken out. Megumi pauses for a moment. The words hang in the air between them, damning.

"I know," Megumi says, and Yuuji freezes. What? *What?* How does he—did Ieiri—

Then Megumi continues. "I already told you not to blame yourself for that," he says, soft but firm. "It's not your fault that Sukuna exploited you."

Oh. He's talking about *that* Binding Vow. Yuuji swallows and presses his nose further into Megumi's neck.

"Not that," he says. "I made another one. With myself. I didn't even realise until I broke it."

"What?" Megumi's voice turns sharp. His hand moves up to tangle in the hair at Yuuji's nape, tugging Yuuji's head back so that Megumi can look at him. His eyes are wide. "You *broke a Binding Vow?* When? How? Are you okay?"

Yuuji huffs out a breath, leaning in to knock their foreheads together. "I'm fine," he says. Megumi's eyes dart over his face, disbelieving. "Seriously, Megumi. The Vow was...the Vow I made was..."

Now or never.

"I swore that I would save you," Yuuji admits, and for a moment he feels like he's right back in Shinjuku again, kneeling by Megumi's body, his hands hovering over the huge Hollow Purple wound in his stomach. Megumi stares at him. "That's the Vow that I made. I did it right after Shibuya, when you and Okkotsu-senpai found me. Do you remember that?"

Megumi nods. Yuuji takes a deep breath, feels it shudder in his chest.

"Back then, you said," Yuuji says, and his voice cracks embarrassingly. "You said, *start by saving me, Itadori.* And I—I thought, to myself—I *promised* myself that I would." He drops his head back down to Megumi's shoulder, unable to bear the dawning realisation in Megumi's eyes. "I made a Vow there without realising. And then I—" His breath hitches. "I broke it."

Megumi sighs. He runs a hand down Yuuji's back, drawing him closer. "Yuuji," he says, and Yuuji already knows what he's going to say. "If you promised to save me, then you didn't break it. You *did* save me. Without you, I wouldn't have—"

"No, Megumi, you don't get it. I—you—" Yuuji squeezes his eyes shut. Forces the words to form on his tongue. "Megumi, you *died."*

Megumi goes still.

For a long time, there's silence. Then Megumi makes a small sound, a little choked exhale, like the breath's been forced out of him.

"...What?" he whispers.

"You died," Yuuji repeats, his voice shaking. He feels both too big and too small for his body. He's survived a thousand lifetimes; he's only truly lived in one. "The first time we were in Shinjuku, Okkotsu-senpai hit you with Hollow Purple, and you died."

"The *first* time?" Megumi asks sharply. Always so observant. Always so smart. "Were we there more than once?"

They were there a dozen times. They were there enough times for Yuuji to recognise the day by the sound of the birds outside his window. Yuuji splays his hands along the small of Megumi's back and reminds himself that they're alive. This time, they're alive.

"When I broke my Vow, it sent me back in time," he tells Megumi. "I don't know how it worked, but after you died, I got sent back. And I tried to save you, I *did,* but..."

For a moment, he thinks of Megumi's wake. He thinks of Megumi's body in the casket, eyes closed, hair gelled.

"You died," Yuuji whispers. It is, in some ways, a confession. "You *kept* dying. This is the first time we've survived Shinjuku. This is—I—" He bites back a sob. "I'm sorry, Megumi. I really am."

Megumi says nothing. He holds Yuuji, and he lets Yuuji hold him, but he says nothing. His hands brush soothingly up and down Yuuji's back, probably more out of habit than anything else, but he says nothing. Yuuji waits with anxiety curdling in his stomach, biting the inside of his cheek as Megumi processes.

Then:

"How many times?"

Yuuji blinks. "...Huh?"

"How many times did I die?" Megumi repeats. His voice is surprisingly steady. How the hell is he this calm after Yuuji just told him that he *died?* "Was it always in Shinjuku?"

"You—no. No, it wasn't," Yuuji says numbly, answering on instinct alone. Megumi had died in Shinjuku. He'd also died in Shibuya, and under the Yasohachi Bridge, and in the forests of Jujutsu Tech, and at Sendai station, and in Tachikawa North High School #4. "I went back a lot of times. It wasn't always Shinjuku. You died before Shinjuku, too. You died every time."

"And how many times was that?"

"I don't know," Yuuji admits, shame burning the back of his throat. This is why he'd wanted to tell Megumi without looking at him. How could he confess this to his face? How could he tell him that he'd failed him so many times that he lost count? "You could try counting, if you want. All the scars—you know, on my chest and stuff—they're the injuries that killed you. There's one for every death."

Megumi's hands stutter on Yuuji's back.

"...Yuuji."

"Yeah?"

"You have a lot of scars."

"Yeah."

They both know the implications of that sentence. Megumi takes a deep breath, then drops his hands to the hem of Yuuji's shirt.

"Can I...?"

"Thought you said my birthday present wasn't naughty," Yuuji jokes weakly. Megumi leans back and fixes him with a flat look. "...Sorry. Yeah, you can."

Swiftly, with all the efficiency of someone who's had to strip Yuuji multiple times to treat wounds while they're on missions, Megumi tugs Yuuji's shirt up and over his head. Yuuji obediently raises his arms to help, shivering a little when the cold air hits his skin. Megumi folds his shirt neatly, looping it over a cabinet handle like a towel, before turning back to survey Yuuji's skin.

Immediately, his mouth tightens a little. Yuuji watches, hardly daring to breathe, as Megumi's eyes dart from scar to scar. Yuuji had said he could try counting them, but in reality, that's impossible; there are so many of them, overlapping and layering on top of each other, that even Yuuji can't tell where some of the scars end or begin.

Megumi reaches out hesitantly, glancing up at Yuuji in a silent question. Yuuji nods: *go ahead.*

Megumi's fingers graze lightly across Yuuji's skin. It's barely a touch, more like a tickle; Yuuji feels more of his nails than anything else. He traces over the perfect semicircle on the right side of Yuuji's chest: Hollow Purple, from Gojo. Megumi's second death. Then he moves his hand up, to the arcing tree-like scar left by Jacob's Ladder.

"Lightning?" he murmurs.

Yuuji shakes his head. He leans into Megumi's touch, wrapping his arms around him again and tugging him in closer. "Jacob's Ladder. Long story."

Megumi nods. He slides his hand down, pressing his palm flat against a bunch of layered scars in the middle of Yuuji's chest. He swallows; Yuuji watches the dip of his throat, watches how his eyes glance all over Yuuji's torso and find barely an inch of skin unmarked.

"I died this many times?" Megumi asks. Yuuji screws his eyes shut. Yes. Yes, Megumi had died this many times. Yuuji had failed him this many times.

"I know," he says, leaning in to rest his head against Megumi's shoulder. "I know, I *know,* I'm sorry, I—"

"Yuuji." Megumi's hand is on his jaw. He tugs Yuuji's face out of his shoulder, forcing Yuuji to look at him. He's looking at Yuuji like he's never seen him before. "You didn't give up?"

Yuuji stares at him. "Huh?"

"I died this many times," Megumi repeats, "and you *didn't give up?"*

Yuuji's hands tighten instinctively around him. "Of course not," he says, and he can't keep the hurt from seeping into his voice. "I...Megumi, I couldn't. I *wouldn't.* Not if it's for you."

It's the truth. Megumi could've died a thousand times and Yuuji still would've tried again. It was only in the very last timeline—*this* timeline—that Yuuji had decided it was best to step back. If, for some awful reason, Megumi dies again...

If Megumi dies again, then Yuuji will still go back for him. Now, he knows that Megumi wants to live. Now, he knows that Megumi will *choose* to live. So, if Megumi needs him to, then Yuuji will go back as many times as it takes. The thought of it makes something hot stick in Yuuji's throat, and he tries to look away again, only for Megumi to stop him with a hand on his cheek.

"Itadori Yuuji, you are unbelievable," Megumi mutters, leaning in to rest their foreheads together. "Thank you."

Yuuji's brain goes blank.

What?

...What?

Thank you? *Thank you?* What the hell is Megumi thanking him for? Yuuji's brain stutters to a halt.

"Huh?" he chokes out. "What—*why?"* He leans back, finally looking Megumi fully in the face just so he can gape at him, and—

Oh.

Megumi's looking at him like he's a miracle. His eyes are wide, so wide that his scars are stretched and crinkled weirdly. His mouth is slightly ajar, curled up at the corners in a breathless smile. Yuuji stares at him, and Megumi stares back, and they're both speechless for totally different reasons.

"Yuuji," Megumi finally breathes, and he sounds—why does he sound like that? Why does he sound *reverent?* He says Yuuji's name like a prayer, like it's something powerful. A familiar warmth starts to prickle at the corners of Yuuji's eyes. "Yuuji, *thank you."*

Yuuji shakes his head instinctively. "You shouldn't—"

"I *should.* And I will." Megumi's thumb strokes across Yuuji's cheek, a gentle brush of warmth. "I can't believe you kept trying. You're insane. You—" He breaks out in a tiny smile. "You saved me."

"I failed you," Yuuji insists, and oh—he's crying now, properly. Megumi's thumb skates over his cheek, leaving a trail of wet warmth behind. "You're alive *now,* sure, but it took me so many tries." He gestures down at himself. "I mean, look!"

Megumi laughs. He *laughs,* short and breathy, and Yuuji can do nothing but stare.

"Who *cares?"* Megumi says. He's blinking faster than usual—he's about to cry too. "Who cares if you failed? Isn't that the only reason I'm here right now?"

...Oh.

Yuuji hasn't thought about it like that before.

He knows, now, that if he had kept on fighting Sukuna in Shinjuku the way he did before he got sent back in time, he wouldn't have saved Megumi. He might have killed Sukuna, but Megumi's soul would've gone with him. If Yuuji had never lost Megumi in a thousand different lives—if he hadn't known, thanks to the Vow, that Megumi loved him so deeply that Yuuji's death would ruin him—if he had never sat at Megumi's grave and forced the Vow to activate anyway—if none of that had happened, would Yuuji ever have realised that he wasn't giving Megumi a choice? Would he have trusted Megumi to take the risk and choose to stay?

Yuuji doesn't know. The thought of it makes him feel faint. Did he *need* to fail in order to save Megumi? Did he *need* to watch him die?

Megumi pulls him out of his downward spiral before it can really start, tapping his fingers against Yuuji's jaw to get his attention. Yuuji looks up, meeting his eyes. God, he loves those eyes.

"You said you made the Binding Vow when I found you after Shibuya," Megumi says quietly. They're close enough that Yuuji can feel his breath. "I'm sorry for that. When I asked you to save me, I didn't mean that you should go back in time over and over just to try." His mouth quirks upwards in his and Tsumiki's shared half-smile. "But I'm glad you did, Yuuji. Thank you."

It's like every last bit of tension in Yuuji's body just—dissolves. Like salt in warm water, like a scrap of paper thrown into a fire. Yuuji slumps against Megumi, inhaling the jasmine smell of his laundry detergent and blinking back more tears.

Megumi's glad. He's *glad.* Yuuji can barely believe it. This boy, this beautiful boy—how does he still think Yuuji's so *good?*

"I love you," Yuuji tells him, because it's the truth. Megumi exhales, a warm puff of breath on Yuuji's skin.

"I love you too," he says, then shifts to pick up Yuuji's shirt again. "You should put this back on."

Yuuji giggles. "What, scared someone'll walk in on us?"

Megumi hits him over the head for that. But he's soft about it, like he always is with Yuuji, and he kisses him after too—so really, it's alright.

They'll be alright.

Yuuji doesn't remember every single timeline blow-for-blow, but he remembers enough. Over the course of the next few months, he explains them to Megumi. At night, as they lie in bed together, Megumi's fingers will skate over the smooth marks on Yuuji's skin. Yuuji will catch his hand and tell him, quietly, about where each one of them came from. He tells Megumi about those first awful timelines in Shinjuku and watches as Megumi traces the Hollow Purples on his stomach and chest. He tells Megumi about Jacob's Ladder, and about Mahoraga in Shibuya, and about how Yuuji had gone back, week by week and month by month, so that he could try to save him.

In return, Megumi tells him about his month with Sukuna. He tells Yuuji about Tsumiki's death, his voice cracking as he does so, and he tells Yuuji about the bath. He says that it had felt like being suffocated—like a wet cloth being placed over his face. Like having a pair of hands wrap around his throat. Like being blindfolded, gagged, and shoved underwater with his hands and feet chained to an iron ball.

Slowly, inch by inch, the two of them bare their secrets to each other. And yet, somehow, Yuuji still finds himself hesitating.

It takes him a long time to tell Megumi about the last timeline: the one where they hadn't been sorcerers. That one sits like an especially sharp thorn between Yuuji's ribs. It's just—it's *worse.* It's worse than all the others. When Megumi brushes his fingers against the line on Yuuji's throat, Yuuji just tells him it's complicated. It's not complicated, not really, but...

But it hurts. That last one had just—it *hurt.* It hurt worse than the others. In that timeline, he'd really, truly thought that he and Megumi could be happy together.

In the end, Yuuji tells Megumi not because he asks, or because Yuuji suddenly makes peace with it. No—he tells Megumi because of a shirt. A stupid shirt.

It starts like this: on Christmas Eve, 2021, exactly three years after Shinjuku, Megumi tames his ninth shikigami.

Koso, he calls it. Tiger Funeral. He summons it for the subjugation ritual right there in Jujutsu Tech, on the field. Yuuji sits on the sidelines, drumming his fingers nervously on his knee, ready to interject if need be.

At first, when Megumi calls out for Koso, Yuuji thinks something's gone wrong. Nothing appears on the field. Yuuji's seen Megumi tame his deer and ox shikigami, and they'd come stalking out of the shadows ready to fight. Koso is nowhere in sight—but then Yuuji leans forward a bit, and he sees a trail of dust being stirred up around the edges of the training ground. The trees rustle one after another, like something is walking past them.

Oh.

Koso is *invisible.*

Megumi shifts on his feet, following Koso's trail with his eyes. When the attack comes, it's so fast that Yuuji almost misses it. There's a tree branch rustled here, a pawprint in the dirt there, and then suddenly a huge tiger materialises in mid-air. It's just inches from Megumi, its fur blazing orange like fire in the sun. Yuuji shoots to his feet, his heart pounding.

"Megumi—!"

Megumi doesn't even glance at him. Kon leaps out of his shadow and intercepts Koso, snarling. The two shikigami go crashing to the ground. Koso's jaws snap closed on nothing but air before it fades out of view again, and—

And Megumi cries out.

Kon whips its head around, which is enough for Koso to slip out from the dog's grasp—Kon flails as its paws hit the ground again. Yuuji takes an instinctive step forward, even though he knows he can't nullify the ritual.

Megumi is clutching his arm. Yuuji can see the outline of a tiger's bite there, red and bleeding sluggishly. But that doesn't make sense—Koso hadn't even touched him.

"Megumi?" he calls, worry bleeding into his voice. Megumi waves him off.

"It's fine," he says. Koso's invisible again, so he's tracking it by the way it affects the things around it—a bit of disturbed dirt here, a crushed weed there. "The first attack must be sure-hit."

Unlike with Madoka and Kangyu, the other two shikigami that Megumi tamed after Shinjuku, Megumi's gone into this ritual blind. Even as the head of the Zen'in clan, he couldn't find notes on Koso. He'd told Yuuji, once, that he suspected Naoya destroyed the clan's records on it, just so he could laugh when Megumi got to his last shikigami—well, technically second-last, but Mahoraga's a league of its own—and was left in the dark.

So now Megumi's fighting an invisible tiger with nothing but his own wits. Great. Yuuji forces himself to sit back down and cheer like a supportive boyfriend, even though it makes him feel faint every time Koso lands a hit.

He can see Megumi's brain working as he fights. He really is smart. A genius, in Yuuji's opinion. When Megumi gets that little scrunch in his brow, Yuuji realises he's got a theory on Koso's ability. Then he summons Datto, the rabbits swarming to encase him and Koso in a dome of white fluff, and Yuuji knows he's put his theory to the test.

To Yuuji's surprise, the rabbit dome dissolves just a few minutes later. Megumi's standing in the centre of the field, panting; there's another bite mark on his calf now. And, in front of him...

Koso stands, fully visible, with a limp rabbit in its jaws. As Yuuji watches, it spits out the rabbit, which promptly dissolves into shadow, and butts its head against Megumi's shoulder.

God, it's *huge*—Megumi just barely comes up to its flank.

Koso opens its mouth and clamps its jaws around Megumi's arm. Yuuji jolts upright, but Megumi doesn't even try to resist. Koso makes a low whining sound deep in its throat, and, to Yuuji's confusion, he can see that its teeth aren't even piercing Megumi's clothes.

Megumi whistles. Behind Koso, Kon materialises again. This time, Koso falls beneath its jaws. It thuds to the ground, a giant body, before slowly dissolving into shadows. Megumi stares at it for a moment before dismissing Kon.

Yuuji cups his hands around his mouth. "Is it over?"

"It's over," Megumi calls back, and Yuuji lets out a whoop. Megumi gives him a tired smile and summons Madoka, letting the deer tend to his wounds. Yuuji picks his way down to the field and immediately charges Megumi, lifting him up in a bear hug and planting a wet kiss on his cheek.

"Yuuji, *ew—"*

"My boyfriend's a geniusssss," Yuuji sings, swinging Megumi around until Madoka gives an annoyed snort and Yuuji remembers that Megumi's technically still injured. He sets him down carefully, then ducks in to kiss him again.

"Proud of you," he says, giddy. "How'd you figure it out?"

Megumi shrugs, tilting his head to give Madoka better access to his arm. "Every time I dodged, it came back stronger," he says. "When I let it attack the rabbits, it got weak. I think that's its technique. It gets stronger the more you avoid it, and weaker if you let it attack."

Yuuji pecks another kiss on his cheek, then one on his lips, then one on his nose. "You're so smart," he says, awestruck. He'd never have been able to figure something like that out—or, at the very least, it would've taken him a lot longer than Megumi. "Can you summon it now?"

Megumi flexes his fingers. "I can try." He puts his hands together in a new sign, and Yuuji watches, making the appropriate 'oohing' sounds, as the tiger manifests out of his shadow. It knocks shoulders with Madoka before slinking around to Megumi's side and promptly turning invisible again.

Megumi must be able to see it now, though, because he reaches out to rest a hand on what looks like thin air. Yuuji watches, pride swelling up in him, as Megumi pats his invisible tiger. God, Yuuji's boyfriend is *so cool.*

Then Megumi sucks in a sharp breath. He lifts his hand, staring at Koso with wide eyes. Yuuji instinctively moves closer to him.

"Everything okay?"

"...Yeah," Megumi says slowly. He reaches up to press his fist against his mouth, but...he's smiling. "It's just—that damn blindfolded idiot is always finding a way to include himself."

Blindfolded idiot?

There's only one person that could be referring to. An old guilty grief rears its head in Yuuji as Megumi murmurs something to Koso, and the tiger makes itself seen again.

Yuuji stares.

Koso's not the fiery orange tiger Yuuji saw earlier. No—now its fur is white as snow, the stripes a deep and glossy black. It settles on the ground at Megumi's feet and looks up at him with startlingly bright blue eyes.

Yuuji knows it's not actually Gojo. That's impossible. Gojo is dead, and humans don't reincarnate as shikigami. But he can't deny that the resemblance is uncanny.

He sits down by Koso without a hint of fear. Now that Megumi's tamed it, he knows that Koso will like him—and, sure enough, the huge tiger twists around to lick at his hand with its sandpaper tongue. Yuuji coos, reaching down to ruffle its fur and finding it ridiculously fluffy. Seriously, why is a killing machine made of shadows this cute?

"Hey," Yuuji says, looking up to find Megumi watching him with something soft in his eyes. "What if we named it—"

"Do *not."*

Yuuji buries his face in Koso's fur, a grin creeping up his lips. "Okay," he says. "I know you're thinking it, though."

Megumi huffs but doesn't protest, which is how Yuuji knows he's right. "I'll go visit him tomorrow," he says, looking away. "This is probably his way of complaining from beyond the grave."

"Probably," Yuuji agrees. "Also, Koso's super fluffy. C'mon and cuddle, I know you want to."

Megumi sighs, but doesn't protest. He kneels down, his head level with Koso's, and reaches out to scratch it beneath the neck. And Koso, the great white tiger, the formidable ninth shikigami of the Ten Shadows technique—it simply rests its head on Megumi's and chuffs, sounding pleased.

Two weeks later, Megumi gets a package from Headquarters.

When he opens it, there's nothing inside but a white uniform shirt, just like Okkotsu's—well, Okkotsu's before he graduated last year. There's no note, no explanation. Yuuji gapes at it, while Megumi pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs.

"Someone told on me," he grumbles. "They found out about Koso. I guess they want to make me a Special Grade."

Yuuji squints at him. "...Is this good news or bad news?"

"Neither. Both. Ugh." Megumi reaches in and plucks the uniform shirt out of the box. He unfolds it, holding it up to the light, and looks at it distastefully. "You know why it's white?"

"'Cause it looks cool?"

"Because it looks *obvious,"* Megumi corrects, scowling. "It's for easy visibility, so they can keep an eye on me. They're always scared of Special Grades."

"So *are* you a Special Grade now?" Yuuji asks curiously. Megumi pulls a face, tossing the shirt down onto his bed.

"Not if I don't accept the promotion," he says, as Yuuji reaches out to pick up the shirt out of curiosity. The material's slightly thicker than the normal uniform, a little stiff and starchy. "And I won't. I don't want it. The only perk is the salary, and I don't need that. Besides, the only reason they're trying to promote me is because they know the only shikigami left for me is Mahoraga, and they want to make sure *I* know that *they* know." He wrinkles his nose. "What's the point of making someone a Special Grade if they haven't even tamed the thing that makes them a Special Grade? It's moronic."

"You can't say the uniform doesn't look cool, though," Yuuji says, holding up the uniform in the air in front of Megumi. "C'mon, at least try it on! Or—hey, it can be your Halloween costume for next year. If you manage to slick your hair down you'll look *just* like Okkotsu-senpai." He shakes the uniform enticingly. "At least once. Pleeease? I'm curious!"

Megumi sighs, but he starts unbuttoning his uniform shirt anyway. Yuuji lets out a little whistle as he strips off the black uniform shirt, and Megumi shoots him a glare.

"Sorry, sorry," Yuuji says, giggling. "Let me put it on you?"

Megumi begrudgingly stays still as Yuuji works his arms through the holes. He swoops in and presses little kisses all over Megumi's face as he does so, a silent *thanks for going along with this,* and he pretends he doesn't see the tiny smile that Megumi fights to hold back. When the Special Grade uniform's on, Yuuji can't deny that it looks snazzy. He folds it closed, right over left, then reaches up to the collar to button it shut.

For a second, Yuuji's vision malfunctions.

White cloth. High neck. Yuuji's hands tighten on the uniform, because, just for the span of a single blink, he's not looking at a uniform. He's looking at the kimono they dressed Megumi's body in for the wake. White, for death. High-necked, to hide his death wound. Instinctively, Yuuji glances up, his heart stuck in his throat, looking for the scar—

Megumi's frowning at him. His neck is bare and untouched. "Yuuji?" he asks. "Are you okay?"

Yuuji snaps the button shut with shaky fingers. "Fine," he says, but he knows he doesn't sound fine. Megumi *definitely* knows he doesn't sound fine. "The uniform looks good."

"Yuuji," Megumi says again, reaching up to cup Yuuji's face in his hands. In the last three years, that's become a habit of his when he finds Yuuji freaking out—he knows, that stupidly smart bastard, that the weight of his fingers on Yuuji's jaw calms Yuuji down, that the feeling of being held on both sides makes Yuuji's heart slow and quiet. He tilts Yuuji's face down to look him in the eyes; Yuuji's taller than him now, even if just by a few centimetres, and Megumi's forever annoyed about it.

"What's wrong?" Megumi asks, and Yuuji feels like he could split in two. Has he always been this obvious? No—it's Megumi who's observant. Megumi's always been the one to see right through Yuuji. Even back in their first year, when Yuuji returned to the school after Junpei's death, Megumi was the only one who figured out that something had happened.

Megumi knows him. Megumi loves him. Yuuji can tell him anything.

So he takes a deep breath, and he reaches up to pull his own collar down. Megumi's eyes flicker down, instinctively going to the decapitation scar.

Yuuji tells him about the last timeline.

They move to the bed at some point, at first sitting on the edge, then lying down with their arms wrapped around each other. Yuuji talks for a while. He talks until his voice goes hoarse. He tells Megumi about how they'd crossed paths as children, even though Yuuji didn't even know that Megumi had seen him until years later. He tells Megumi about how he'd asked Gojo to give Megumi another choice, and Gojo had listened. He tells Megumi about moving to Tokyo for him, and about Tachikawa North High School #4.

He tells Megumi that they were friends, and that they fell in love, and that Megumi died not two months later.

"They dressed you in a white kimono for the wake," Yuuji manages to choke out, and Megumi understands immediately. He practically rips off the Special Grade uniform and tosses it in the corner before returning to Yuuji's side. Yuuji hugs him so tight he hears Megumi wheeze. He tucks his head into the crook of Megumi's neck and presses a kiss to his unmarked throat.

There's one more detail that he hasn't mentioned yet. One thing that he'd carefully left out, just because he knows—he *knows*—that it will affect Megumi more badly than anything else he's heard Yuuji say so far. But Yuuji can't let himself finish this conversation without telling him, so he takes a deep breath and forces his voice to work.

"And, Megumi?"

"Hm?"

"One last thing, about that timeline." Yuuji lifts his head to look Megumi in the eyes. "Tsumiki-nee-chan was there, too. I met her."

Megumi bolts upright. He stares down at Yuuji, his eyes wide, his mouth slightly ajar. Yuuji can't tell if he looks amazed or horrified.

"...What?" Megumi whispers.

Yuuji reaches up and brushes a stray lock of hair behind Megumi's ear. "I met her," he repeats. "The real Tsumiki. Properly, I mean."

Megumi's eyes bounce between Yuuji's, searching for something. "Did you..." His tongue darts out and wets his lip. "...did you like her?"

Yuuji can't help but let out a little laugh. *"Like* her? Megumi, after you died, I think she saved my life."

It's not even an exaggeration. In the week after Megumi died, Tsumiki was Yuuji's lifeline to the world. She'd been the only friend he talked to, the only person who hugged him at Megumi's wake. She was the one who told him where Megumi was buried. If it wasn't for her, Yuuji would've curled up in his apartment and wasted away.

Megumi looses a little breath. "Oh," he says, and his voice cracks. "And did she...like you?"

"I think so." Yuuji rubs his fingers over the shell of Megumi's ear, watching the skin fold under his touch. "The first time we met, it was 'cause I stopped Kenjaku from cursing her, but then we met at school too. She was my physics tutor at first. Then I started hanging out with you, so I started hanging out with her too. I used to call her for advice when I was grocery shopping. We'd text each other if we saw cute dogs. She invited me to sit with you two during the sports festival and gave me little sandwiches. I tried teaching you how to cook once and she took photos and laughed at us." He crooks a smile at Megumi. "We were friends."

Megumi looks like he's been hit over the head with Nobara's hammer. He gapes at Yuuji, utterly stunned.

"You were friends?" he asks. His voice cracks a little. "Real friends? You—you *knew* her?"

"Yeah. I mean, not *well,* but...yeah," Yuuji says. Megumi just stares at him. "She liked astronomy, right? That's why she was so good at physics." He racks his brain for anything else he knows about Tsumiki. "Uh, she liked music from the eighties. At least, I *think* she liked it, 'cause I could hear her playing it in her room whenever I went over to your place. She kept snacks in her bag. Oh, and she got on my ass for not wearing sunscreen. She told me I was gonna get skin cancer at twenty and die alone."

"She told me the same," Megumi says faintly. He reaches out, gripping Yuuji's hand; his palms are sweaty. "So she...she really did like you, then. If she told you to wear your sunscreen. She..." He makes a sound, deep in the back of his throat, like a wounded animal. "I knew she'd like you."

That sentence alone holds more weight than Yuuji could ever hope to bear. He intertwines his and Megumi's fingers and squeezes tight.

"I liked her, too," Yuuji tells him honestly. The smile he gets in return is small, and born just as much out of grief as it is out of joy, but it's a smile nonetheless.

They graduate high school.

It's weird. They move out of the dorms; Megumi goes to stay at the Zen'in household, and Yuuji follows him, just because his only other accomodation is his grandpa's house back in Sendai. They hang up their uniforms; now, if Yuuji wants, he can go kick a curse's ass in nothing but his pajamas. Nobara gets sent out just days after the graduation ceremony—they ship her off to *Switzerland,* of all places, on an overseas assist that's supposed to take at least a month. Yuuji misses her instantly, even though she rolls her eyes at him and promises to video call. Sure, she spams his and Megumi's phones constantly with pictures, but it's not the same. It's a lot of change all at once, and Yuuji doesn't know how to feel about it.

The Zen'in household—at least, the base that they have in Tokyo city, not the traditional estate in Kyoto—isn't the most welcoming of places. It's big, and it's old, and Yuuji constantly feels out of place in his modern clothes. Sure, the few clan members that are left respect Megumi as their head. Sure, they're all terrified of Maki and won't step out of line. But Yuuji and Megumi are still the youngest in the house by far, excluding a toddler that was born just a few years ago, and it shows. Everyone else in the clan is older, with older values. A single massacre at Maki's hands still wasn't enough to wash the Zen'ins of their outdated ways. Megumi's made it clear that he expects the old Zen'in traditions to die out, but...well, it's easier said than done. There are still servants who scurry along the walls, trying their best to stay out of sight. The women still instinctively look to the men before doing anything. And, of course, no one likes Yuuji.

Yuuji knows he's an intruder here. Everywhere he walks, he feels eyes on him. He doesn't know if it's because of his personality, his status as Megumi's boyfriend, or because he's Sukuna's former vessel and the inheritor of his technique. Megumi had told him, once, that by all rights Yuuji's meant to be a Special Grade too, but the elders of the Gojo clan had argued the promotion because Yuuji's techniques were 'stolen'. Frankly, Yuuji doesn't care, but it does give him a bit of a better idea of what the jujutsu world's general opinion of him is.

It's on a warm spring day, as they laze in the dojo without doing any of the training they said they would do, that Megumi turns to Yuuji and says, "You hate it here, don't you?"

Yuuji cringes. "'Hate' is a strong word."

"It's the right word."

"Yeah, maybe," Yuuji admits. There's no point in him lying to Megumi; Megumi can sniff it out in ten seconds flat. "But I don't mind, really. Rent's crazy in Tokyo, so it's nice that we didn't have to go buy our own place."

Megumi shifts. "...What if we did?"

Yuuji blinks. Outside, in the spring sky, a pair of birds take flight.

"What?" Yuuji props himself up on his elbows to look down at Megumi, who's lying on the floor. "You mean—our own place?"

Megumi glances away, a telltale sign that he cares more about this than he's letting on. "Why not?" he says. "You hate it here. I hate it here. Let's just leave."

"You hate it here?"

"Are you dumb? Of course I hate it. When have I ever liked the Zen'in?"

"I mean, you're the head now," Yuuji points out. "I kinda just thought you accepted it."

Megumi scoffs. "Please. I'm handing that off to Maki the second she decides she wants it. No way am I doing this for the rest of my life." He rolls over onto his side, looking up at Yuuji. "So. Yes or no?"

"Hmm, I dunno." Yuuji taps his chin thoughtfully. "Moving out of a huge old house with people I hate to go live with the beautiful love of my life in our very own place? Man, tough decision."

Megumi kicks his shin lightly. "Take this seriously," he scolds, but his cheeks are pink, either from the heat or from Yuuji calling him the love of his life.

"I am taking this seriously! Didn't you just hear me say that it's a tough decision?"

Megumi groans, flopping back over onto his back. Yuuji lets out a laugh and leans down to kiss his eyelids, the pink tip of his nose, the adorable furrow of his brow.

So they start looking for a place.

Yuuji's not picky. He and Megumi don't have to worry about commuting to work or university or anything, since they'll be provided with whatever transport they need. When Megumi asks, the only thing Yuuji requests is that their apartment is *not* in Tachikawa. Megumi agrees easily, understanding flashing in his eyes.

They find an apartment shockingly fast: a cosy two-bedroom in Minami-Aoyama, still fairly close to the heart of the city. The extra bedroom, they both silently agree, is just insurance for when Nobara comes to stay—and she *will* come to stay, especially once she finds out where they're located. They move in by the end of summer, and it's...it's nice.

It's better than nice. It's good. It's great. It's everything Yuuji ever could've wanted.

Yuuji gets stupidly giddy when they go shopping for furniture together. It's tangible proof that they live together, and not just in the dorms at school. No—they're *together*. They have a life together. They're making their own space in the world, a little apartment that's all their own. Yuuji and Megumi's apartment. Yuuji-and-Megumi, a unit, a pair.

Well. Yuuji-and-Megumi-and-sometimes-Nobara, since she insists on being part of the furniture selection process. Yuuji video calls her in the middle of the store and looks like a total dumbass showing her everything, but it's worth it, because she ends up spotting a really

good couch that Yuuji would've bypassed otherwise. She doesn't shut up about it for the next ten minutes, but Yuuji just shoves her in his pocket and waits for her to stop.

They host a small housewarming party. By some small miracle, everyone's able to attend. Nobara's obnoxiously smug when everyone crowds around the couch, so Yuuji slings an arm around her neck and puts her into a headlock until she stomps on his foot so hard he swears he hears something shatter. Even Ieiri makes an appearance, dipping away from the school for a few hours because there are no missions scheduled, and she gives Yuuji a firm nod when they cross paths.

"Glad it worked out," she tells him, and Yuuji gets oddly emotional over that, because it *did* work out, didn't it? He and Megumi are together and alive. Megumi knows everything about the Vow. They've got an apartment together, and all their friends are here on the couch that Nobara picked out, and Okkotsu and Inumaki are insisting that Yuuji call them by their first names now that they're all graduated. Things have worked out, in the end. Things are good.

He and Megumi settle into a life together, and they settle into it well. Maybe it's just a side effect of basically living together since they were fifteen, but they already move around each other so seamlessly that it feels like they've had the apartment for years. Yuuji does discover more tiny little intimacies about Megumi, though—like, for instance, how he likes to organise the cutlery drawer, or how he always sits down at the genkan to put his shoes on instead of just shuffling into them awkwardly like Yuuji does. Yuuji finds it stupidly endearing that, even after spending almost a quarter of their lives together, there's still so much of Megumi for him to learn.

For instance: he learns that Megumi likes simple things. Or, to be more accurate, he observes that Megumi likes simple things, then tests his theory and finds that it's correct. Megumi likes it when things are straightforward, uncomplicated; he likes simple meals, plain solid-colour shirts, and practical furniture that serves its purpose. Yuuji, obviously, has no opposition to any of that, though he will admit that he's got a weakness for funky furniture. Sue him—the dog lampstand was cute.

Megumi indulges him, though. When Yuuji puts up his movie posters on the walls, all Megumi does is ask that the horror movie ones are facing away from the bed. When Yuuji sheepishly shows him the dog lampstand, Megumi just frowns and says that he thinks Kon is cuter. When Yuuji tacks a bunch of photos to their fridge with little clay magnets that he made when he was a kid, he catches Megumi standing in the kitchen more than once, tracing over the imprint of Yuuji's six-year-old fingers and smiling softly.

The months pass, and things are easy. Yuuji won't lie—he's almost waiting for the other shoe to drop. He keeps thinking that there's no way things could be this good. But, as week after week goes by, Yuuji slowly lets himself relax.

Things aren't perfect, of course, but then again they never could be. Megumi still freezes up at night sometimes—all his muscles just lock, and his breathing starts coming out harsh, and all Yuuji can do is murmur quiet comforts to him while making sure that he's directly in Megumi's line of sight. One time, as Megumi is showering, they get a spectacularly ill-timed blackout, and Yuuji has to bust down the bathroom door to drag his panicking boyfriend out of the tub. That had been a particularly bad one.

Yuuji still has nightmares, too. Sometimes he forgets that Megumi's scars are scars. Sometimes he dreams of things that never happened. Once, he wakes up after Megumi—something that almost *never* happens—and the empty bed convinces him that he's gone back in time again.

That morning is a terrible morning for Yuuji. He tears through the entire apartment in a panic, only for Megumi to come in through the door ten minutes later with a carton of milk in his hands. He finds Yuuji in the kitchen with his head in his hands. Yuuji doesn't remember that bit. When he tries to think of it, all he remembers is Megumi's voice, steady and soothing, like the murmur of a river in Yuuji's ear. *I'm here,* Megumi had told him, over and over again. *I'm here. I'm okay.*

So no, things aren't perfect, but Yuuji thinks this is probably the most perfect they could get. He and Megumi both have missions, but they try to align them so that they're both home for dinner most nights. Megumi can cook now. Like, *actually* cook, thanks to a few years of lessons from Yuuji, and he always tries to make sure there's something warm on the table whenever Yuuji comes home late. It would be easier for him to just heat up the leftovers of whatever Yuuji made the night before, but Megumi's stubborn—he insists on making something fresh for Yuuji by himself.

Yuuji loves him for it. He always kisses Megumi first before he eats anything, and then he makes some corny joke about how the food could never measure up to Megumi's lips, and then Megumi shoves him aside and tells him to shut up and eat. Then, when they're both done, Yuuji does the dishes and puts on some of his grandpa's old cassettes with the player that Megumi bought him, and at the end of the night they'll be swaying in the kitchen to songs from the sixties.

It's on one of these nights, as the tune of Blue Light Yokohama fills the kitchen, that Megumi freezes in Yuuji's arms.

Yuuji lifts his head immediately from where it was resting on Megumi's shoulder. "You okay?"

Megumi's staring at him. His eyes are wide. His mouth is slightly ajar.

"Yuuji," he breathes, over the sound of the song's intro music. "I think we did it."

Yuuji blinks at him.

"Did what?" he asks. "Dinner? We've done that loads of times. We're dinner pros by now." He flexes by Megumi's head, just because he can, and Megumi huffs out a laugh.

"No, not dinner," he says, and his voice is oddly shaky. "I mean—what I described to you, in your Domain. I think we did it."

What had Megumi described in Yuuji's Domain? Well, that's easy. He'd sat across from Yuuji at the table and told Yuuji about his ideal world. About meals cooked out of habit, watching their laundry dry in the sun, walking side-by-side...

Wait.

"Yokohama, Blue Light Yokohama," Ishida Ayumi sings from the cassette, as the realisation sinks into Yuuji like a stone sinking through water. *"I'm happy with you..."*

The world that Megumi described in Shinjuku no longer exists. Tsumiki is dead. Gojo is dead. Yuuji and Megumi are both too deeply entrenched in the jujutsu world to leave it behind, especially after what the Culling Game did to Japan.

But eating home-cooked meals, watching their laundry, walking side by side...isn't that all still possible? No—it *is* possible. Yuuji knows it's possible because they're doing it right now.

Megumi's right. He's *right.* They've done it. That perfect, dull, impossible world—*they've done it.*

They're sorcerers, yes, but they can be more than that. They don't have to restrict themselves to one role. Just being sorcerers doesn't mean they can't still have this.

Yuuji can't help the smile that breaks out on his face, hopelessly happy. "We *did* do it," he breathes. "Wow. Go us."

Megumi huffs out an incredulous laugh. "Go us," he echoes, leaning forward to rest his head against Yuuji's shoulder. "I—Yuuji, I..."

Yuuji turns his head to press a kiss to Megumi's hair. "It's okay," he says softly, feeling like his heart is all lit up and rising up his throat. "I know."

Megumi makes a muffled sound into Yuuji's shoulder. Then he turns, reaching up to curl a hand around Yuuji's nape as he draws him in for a kiss. Megumi doesn't notice, of course, but his fingers brush against the decapitation scar on Yuuji's neck, and Yuuji feels a shiver run through him.

It took him a long time, but he's gotten here in the end. *They've* gotten here. They've done it.

"Give me one more tender kiss," Ishida Ayumi sings, so Yuuji leans in, gently tips Megumi's chin up, and does just that.

"If you lose it, I'll kill you," Nobara says. "If you let him see it, I'll kill you. And if you spill the beans—"

"Yeah, yeah, I got it," Yuuji says, as she creeps over to the door of the jewellery store and peeks out to make sure there's no chance of the two of them being seen. She's taking this just as seriously, if not even more so, than Yuuji is—she'd insisted that they both wear disguises, which is why Yuuji's currently wearing Toge's ratty old Yomiuri Giants cap to hide his distinctive hair. Nobara herself has her hair pulled back in a bun, a hairstyle she usually never

wears, and she's hiding her left eye with a pair of sunglasses. The sunglasses actually make her stick out even more because no one wears sunglasses indoors, but Yuuji's not gonna be the one to tell her that.

Nobara makes them go all the way to a café two streets away before she decides they're safe. Then she drags Yuuji right to the very back and snaps her fingers impatiently.

"C'mon, c'mon, let's see it!"

"You've already seen it!" Yuuji protests. "You helped me pick it!"

"Yeah, but *still,"* Nobara says. She looks like she's about to fly out of her chair with excitement. "That was just in the display case. *This* is the real deal."

Yuuji would say she's being overdramatic, but he's practically vibrating with excitement too. He opens the sleek little bag and pulls out its precious contents, then carefully opens the box and sets it on the table. He and Nobara both lean over it, blocking it with their bodies like someone's going to creep up on them and see it.

Yuuji stares down at the engagement ring and can't help but smile.

"It's beautiful," he whispers to himself. Simple, the way Megumi likes it, but still with a flair of elegance to it that Yuuji thinks is fitting for his beloved. Nobara puffs up.

"'Course it is, I helped you choose it," she says. She reaches out and grips Yuuji's arm. "You're still on for January?"

"Uh-huh." Yuuji plucks the ring out of the box reverently, handling it oh-so-carefully. In just under one month's time, he'll be getting down on one knee, and hopefully this ring will be on Megumi's finger. "I'm gonna do it after we get back from the beach. Either that or the day after, if he's too tired."

"The *beach,"* Nobara mutters. "Can't believe you guys are going in winter. No one goes in winter."

"That's the point! We'll have it all to ourselves!"

"Yeah, and it'll suck," Nobara says, rolling her eyes. "But it's you and Megumi, so I should've known you'd be weird." She squeezes his arm. "You *have* to record the proposal. I'll kill you if you don't."

"He won't want it recorded. I've got a whole speech and everything, he'll be embarrassed as hell if anyone else hears that."

Nobara raises her brows. "The speech that you've been rehearsing with me for the last month? That speech? He doesn't want anyone hearing it?"

"Don't *tell* him that," Yuuji says, sliding the ring back into the box and snapping it shut. "You know how he likes to keep this stuff private."

Nobara huffs. "Fine, then you have to video-call me right after. I *demand* to be the first one to know, you hear me?"

"Well, duh," Yuuji says. "Who else?"

Nobara makes a sound that's suspiciously close to a sniffle. "Yeah, that's right," she says, as she starts blinking rapidly. "Who else?"

She slides her sunglasses back on. Yuuji pretends that he doesn't know she's tearing up behind them.

She hugs him goodbye at the train station, blurting out a congratulations that's so raw-sounding she goes red with embarrassment. Yuuji laughs, kisses her on the top of her head, and waves at her as his train pulls away. He puts his earphones in; it's going to be a long ride.

The Fushiguro family grave is exactly where Yuuji remembers.

He's come here with Megumi once before, early last year, soon after he told Megumi about the Tachikawa timeline. Megumi had introduced Yuuji and Tsumiki, and he'd told her about other things, too, like how he was sure Gojo was being annoying from beyond the grave through Koso. But Yuuji has also been at this grave one more time before that—only, that time, the person buried here wasn't Tsumiki. That time, Yuuji had sat down next to the grave and begged the universe to kill him.

This time, he comes bearing chocolate.

"Hi, Tsumiki-nee-chan," he says, leaning down to sweep a few leaves off her grave with his sleeve. "I dunno if you remember me. I'm Itadori Yuuji, Megumi's boyfriend. He's good, by the way, he's doing well." He coughs, rocking back on his heels. "Uh, I know this is kind of weird, since you didn't know me in this life, but I wanted to thank you. You, um...in another world, you were really good to me. You helped me a lot, even though you didn't have to. So—thanks. And sorry, I don't know your favourite snack, but you said once that everyone likes chocolate, so I just got you these."

He puts the little pack of konbini chocolates on her grave. The plastic is obnoxiously bright in the sun.

"I'm really sorry I couldn't protect Megumi in that world," he tells her quietly. If he tries hard enough, he can still remember being in his bedroom, phone pressed to his ear, Tsumiki's voice on the other end as she told him Megumi was dead. 9:49 PM. "And I'm sorry I couldn't protect you or Gojo-sensei in this one. But I promise I'm taking care of Megumi now. You don't have to worry about him. I've even taught him how to cook. I've, uh—I've actually got something I wanted to tell you."

He pulls out the bag from the jewellery store and turns it so that the logo's facing the gravestone.

"Next month, I'm going to ask him to marry me," he tells her. Just saying the words out loud feels surreal. "Nobara helped me pick a ring. I bet you would've been great at it, if I asked

you. I hope he likes it—here, you can see." He opens the box and turns it so that the ring catches the light. "You think it's good? I really hope so. Gah, I'm nervous." He fiddles with the box. "I hope he'll say yes. He'll probably say yes. We're always talking about how we'll die old together. Sorry, was that too morbid? I think that was too morbid." He rubs at his nape sheepishly, snapping the box shut. "Anyway, I just wanted to let you know. I'm gonna go tell Gojo-sensei too, so...if you guys are in the same place right now, maybe don't tell him? Or do, if you want. You can brag that I told you first." He clears his throat. "So, yeah. And thanks again, Tsumiki-nee-chan. In another life, I bet we would've been best friends."

He bows to her, low enough that he nearly whacks the gravestone with his forehead. As he straightens up, something cold touches the tip of his nose.

He looks up at the sky, squinting. There's a sparse scattering of white flakes falling from the sky: snow. The first snow of the year, in fact.

Yuuji instinctively reaches for his phone to snap a photo for Megumi. As he does so, he feels a smile spread across his face. Somewhere, someplace, he likes to think that Tsumiki's smiling back.

"That's enough," Megumi says.

Yuuji squints down at the basket. "No, I think I can fit one more," he says, reaching for another onigirazu. Megumi slaps his hand away.

"This is already way too much. We can't finish all this in one day, Yuuji."

"We can eat it for breakfast tomorrow! Or feed it to Kon."

"For the last time, Kon's not—ugh. Fine. Let's just get this into the car."

Yuuji hefts the basket up into his arms and obediently follows Megumi to the car. They strap the basket into the backseat, where Yuuji jokes that it's like a kid, and Megumi double-checks that they've got all their bags. Swimsuits, towels, clothes, toiletries, everything they could need for a five-day stay in Kamakura. Then, once Megumi's satisfied, they set off.

Megumi drives, as he usually does. Yuuji *does* have a license, but everyone's a little bit more at ease when the guy with one working eye is sitting in the passenger seat. It's all for the better, anyway, because Megumi doesn't seem like it, but he's got a serious case of backseat driver syndrome. Every time Nobara drives—or, god forbid, *Maki*—Megumi gets all twitchy and Yuuji has to squeeze his hand to remind him not to call out.

So Yuuji winds down the window, just enough to feel the wind in his hair but not enough to make it hard for Megumi to blink, and he sings along to the playlist he put together for this. All those nights of listening to his grandpa's cassettes have rubbed off on him, and Megumi

says he's got the taste of an old man, but Yuuji sees him nodding along. The drive isn't that bad; it only takes them a little bit over an hour to get from Tokyo to Kamakura. Megumi insists on stopping by their rental property before they hit the beach, because he doesn't want to unpack all their stuff while he's covered in sand. Yuuji has to admit that it's sound logic.

So they stop by the cabin first, and they unload. They chill for a little bit, exploring the place, before deciding to head to the beach before it gets too dark. Yuuji waits until Megumi's in the car, checking that their swimsuits and beach towels are there, before he hides in the hallway and pulls out the ring.

He's not planning to propose until later tonight, when they're back here at the cabin. He's already got it planned out and everything—he knows that Megumi will hit the shower and then probably pass out for an hour or two, so he'll use the time to whip up dinner, complete with the candles that he secretly stashed at the bottom of his bag. It's cheesy, sure, but Megumi doesn't like big spectacles. He'd much prefer his favourite meal and Yuuji proposing in total privacy, so that's exactly what Yuuji's doing.

He shoves the ring box into the coffee table drawer. The chances of Megumi finding it there are lower than low, and Yuuji's not going to risk bringing it to the beach with him. He stands back up, makes sure that the drawer is shut tight, then heads out to meet Megumi at the car.

Yuuji drives this time, since the road's practically empty. They're only around fifteen minutes from the nearest beach. When they get there, it's just as empty as Yuuji hoped; barely anyone comes here on a cold day in the middle of January. There's a few lone surfers in the distance, but Yuuji parks far enough down the beach that they probably won't run into them.

They pull out the picnic blanket and lay it down on the sand, then dig into the food that they brought. To Yuuji's dismay, Megumi was right—there's way too much food. When Megumi first brought up the idea of a picnic, Yuuji *may* have gotten a little too excited at the opportunity to make a bunch of cute finger foods. At least he gets to see Megumi smile at all the animal-themed ones.

When they've both had their fill, they change into their swimming trunks. Megumi keeps his jacket on in acquiescence to the cold, but Yuuji just sprawls out on the sand, shirtless. It's not exactly a great day for sunbathing, but Yuuji closes his eyes nonetheless, spreading out his arms—

Something warm and wet presses against the middle of his chest. Yuuji shrieks and bolts upright.

He opens his eyes to find Megumi snickering next to him. "Just a kiss," he says, patting the part of Yuuji's chest where the most scars are gathered. "Before you get all sandy."

"I thought you were a fish or something," Yuuji gasps, his heart still racing. Megumi gives him a *you dumbass* look, then leans in to kiss Yuuji's bad eye before getting to his feet and walking further down the beach.

Yuuji gives up on his pretence at sunbathing a few minutes later. He can see Megumi further down the beach, supervising Gama and Bansho as the shikigami play around in the water.

There's a few rock pools nearby, so Yuuji heads over there. As he always does when he goes to the beach, he keeps an eye out for shells.

It takes up a good chunk of his time. He's hunched over a while later, squinting at his bounty, when he hears footsteps crunching in the sand behind him.

Megumi leans over his shoulder. "Got anything good?"

"Uh-huh." Yuuji opens his hands to show him, picking out the shells one by one. "This one's for Nobara, and this one's for Yuuta, and these two are for Toge—"

"Two? The others will be jealous."

"Well, he's the only one who can actually name all the animals these shells came from, so I figured he deserved it," Yuuji says. Then he points out a particularly pretty shell, white speckled with brown. He'd been careful to find one that was whole, with no chips or cracks. "That one's for Tsumiki-nee-chan."

Megumi nods slowly. Then, in one smooth motion, he reaches out and drops something else in Yuuji's palm.

"For Gojo-sensei," he says. Yuuji blinks down at the ugly, pale, misshapen rock. *Is* it a rock? No, it's—

"Dead coral?" Yuuji demands. Megumi's mouth quirks up into a half-smile.

"Can't let his ego get any bigger than it already is," he says, and Yuuji can't help it—he snorts. Megumi's smile gets a touch more real.

The coral is a joke, obviously, but Yuuji tucks it away with the others anyway. He eventually finds a rock—smooth, oval, dark grey—that goes into his pocket; that one will be the one that *actually* goes on Gojo's grave. Megumi comes back from the rock pools a few minutes later and passes Yuuji a reddish-orange cone shell.

"For June," he explains, and Yuuji swallows back the ball of emotions that rise up in his chest. He takes the cone with a wordless nod, watching as Megumi goes back to the pools again to look for more. In June, they'll be heading back to Sendai, so that Yuuji can pay his respects to his grandfather on the sixth anniversary of his death. He wishes that he and Megumi could've met. The thought of it, of the two of them butting heads over dinner or something, makes Yuuji smile.

Six years. God, he can't believe he'll be twenty-one soon. He's a full-blown legal adult.

"Man, Jii-chan," he tells the cone shell. "If you could see me now."

He walks over back to the picnic blanket, arranging the shells on a spare napkin and snapping a photo to send to the group chat. Almost immediately, Nobara sends a message demanding to know why Toge has two shells. Yuuji laughs quietly to himself, then looks up as Megumi approaches, peering down at the shells.

"Who're those ones for?" he asks, nodding at the right-hand side of the napkin.

"That's Maki, and that's Ieiri-san," Yuuji says. "And Panda's not getting any 'cause he'll just break it once he tries to hold it."

"That's why I got him a rock," Megumi says, reaching out to place a small round rock on the corner of the napkin. Yuuji beams at him.

"You're so smart," he says dopily. "I love you."

Megumi exhales through his nose. "Love you too," he murmurs. Yuuji knows he makes it a point to never let Yuuji's *I love you*'s go unanswered. Then he squints at the two shells on the furthest end, slightly separated from the others and touching at the edges. "What about those two?"

"That's me, and that's you," Yuuji says, pointing. "Look, we're kissing."

"That's stupid," Megumi says, but he still treads carefully around the napkin to avoid jostling the shells.

"I'm gonna drill holes in 'em and make them into a necklace," Yuuji informs him. "So we can have a souvenir from today."

"Only one necklace? We'll have to trade off who gets to wear it."

Yuuji frowns. "Good point. Huh." He looks down at the shells. "Guess I'll have to find another two."

Megumi clears his throat. "No need," he says, and as he leans down Yuuji can see a pink flush crawling up his neck. Gently, he places another two shells on the napkin. They're not the same as the ones that Yuuji picked out, but they're beautiful nonetheless.

Megumi coughs, pointing. "That's you," he says, to Yuuji's utter delight. "And the other one is me." He glances up, and he must already know what Yuuji's going to say, because he sighs and moves the shells so that they're touching. "And we're kissing."

Yuuji lets out a whoop, punching the air triumphantly. Megumi watches him with a fond little curve to his lips, so Yuuji reels him in for a *real* kiss. Two of them, in fact, for each set of shell-selves that they've got.

They both lie back on the blanket for a bit after that, talking quietly about everything and nothing. They both see each other every day, but they still somehow find things to chat about. Megumi tells Yuuji about how well Maki's adapted to her new role as the Zen'in clan head. Yuuji tells Megumi about the new first-years he ran into the other day, and how one of them had asked him for a photo. Then they get into an argument about whether or not Yuuji could, hypothetically, use Divine Flame to turn the sand they're sitting on into glass.

By the time Megumi says he wants to go into the water, the sun's already close to setting. Yuuji eyes him warily. There's a reason that neither of them have gone into the ocean yet, and it's a very good reason.

It's been just over five years since Shinjuku. Megumi still gets nervous around large bodies of water. He can take showers, but he refuses to take baths, and if the water level gets higher than his waist then he starts to panic a little. The fact that *he'd* been the one to suggest this beach trip was a huge step for him. It's only the second time Megumi's been to the beach since Shinjuku. The first time had been with everyone else, and back then, he hadn't gone near the water at all—he'd hung back, eyes fixed on his book, as Yuuji lounged beside him and strategically blocked his view of the ocean.

And now here he is, years later, going into the water of his own free will. Yuuji's so incredibly proud of him.

Megumi stands, unzipping his jacket and tossing it onto the blanket. "I won't be long," he tells Yuuji, as he summons Kon. "I'll just go up to my knees."

Yuuji hums in acknowledgment. "You want company?"

Megumi hesitates. At his side, Kon—now a hulking beast of a dog, taller than Yuuji when it stands on its hind legs—nudges his hand. Megumi reaches back and ruffles its fur absently.

"I think I'll be okay," he says, and Yuuji nods. He doesn't have to tell Megumi that he'll be here if things don't end up being okay; Megumi already knows. "Don't let sand get on my jacket."

Yuuji salutes him. "Yes, sir!"

Megumi snorts, but when Yuuji reaches out expectantly, he reaches back. Yuuji catches his hand and presses a kiss to the back of it, then to the dip of his wristbone.

"Keep him safe," Yuuji tells Kon, who lets out a low *boof* of acknowledgment.

"I'll be twenty metres away," Megumi tells him dryly. "You'll be able to see me. And Kon is *my* shikigami."

"You know what I mean," Yuuji says, dropping his hand. He pushes lightly at Megumi's calf with his foot. "Now go on. Once the sun goes down it'll be even colder."

Megumi nods and turns away, walking calmly down to the water. Yuuji watches him, pride swelling in his chest, as he walks into the ocean with no hesitation. The water rises to his ankles, then his calves; Kon butts its head against his shoulder, and Megumi reaches out to wrap his arms around its neck in a clear gesture of comfort.

Yuuji leans back, reaching over to pick up Megumi's fallen jacket. He dusts it off a little, about to fold it into a neat square for Megumi, but he pauses when he feels a weight in the right pocket. He pats at it experimentally and hisses when he pokes his finger on a sharp angle.

A rock? A broken shell that got in somehow? Yuuji should probably take it out. He reaches into the pocket and wraps his fingers around something small and pokey. He pulls it out—

He freezes.

The box in his hands is smaller than his fist. It's a simple navy blue, with gold hinges on one side and an elegant logo stamped on top. Yuuji recognises that logo: it's from a high-end jewellery store, the kind that people go to when they're looking for...

"You've got to be kidding me," Yuuji breathes to himself, looking up instinctively. Megumi's brought out Koso now. The tiger and Kon bat at each other in the water, with Megumi standing between them. He's not paying Yuuji any attention at all.

Slowly, Yuuji slips the ring box back into Megumi's pocket. The urge to take a peek is overwhelming, but—Yuuji won't. He'll leave that part as a surprise.

He *does,* however, silently curse himself for leaving his own ring box in the cabin. Damn it. Megumi's got him beat. The only way Yuuji can be the first one to propose now is if, for some reason, Megumi just decided to bring the ring to the beach while planning to propose later.

Oh well. Yuuji can think of worse things to lose at than this. He sits back, already starting to feel like he's floating away, and he has to bury his face in his hands before he starts giggling loud enough to draw Megumi's attention.

Then he remembers: he's missing his left ring finger. He glances down at it. It's cut off before the first knuckle—there's definitely not enough left of it to hold a ring.

"If you forgot about that, I'll keep bringing it up for the rest of our lives," he tells Megumi, grinning. Megumi, of course, is metres away and surrounded by the crashing waves; he doesn't hear a word Yuuji says. Yuuji watches him and loves him so much he feels like he could burst.

He should go tell him that, actually.

Yuuji stands. He carefully adjusts Megumi's jacket so that the ring box isn't too visible inside the pocket, then makes his way down to the water. Kon comes trotting over to him as he steps into the cold ocean, nosing affectionately at his hair, and Yuuji laughs as he pets the dog's wet fur. Megumi turns around at the sound, surprised.

"Yuuji?" He's scratching Koso behind the ears, but he lets go of the tiger to reach an arm out to Yuuji. Yuuji takes it and wades over to him, wrapping his arms around him. "I thought you weren't swimming."

"Changed my mind," Yuuji tells him, giddy. Megumi gives him a strange look.

"Okay," he says, leaning back a little to squint suspiciously at Yuuji's face. "Why are you smiling like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like an idiot."

Yuuji pouts. "You always say that."

"Because you smile a lot, and you're an idiot." Megumi pats his cheek. "It's alright. I love you anyway."

And he does. He *does* love Yuuji. He loves Yuuji enough to marry him. Yuuji giggles this time, unable to hold it in, and leans in to kiss Megumi again. This time he draws it out a little, makes it last long enough that heat sparks in his stomach and Megumi's hand slides up his jaw and into his hair.

By the time they separate, they're both a little breathless. Yuuji nudges the tip of his nose against Megumi's, staring into his eyes.

"Come back to the blanket?" he murmurs against Megumi's lips. "We still have to finish the food."

"I told you not to pack so much."

"It's fine. Like I said, we can have it for breakfast."

Megumi lays his hand on Yuuji's side—coincidentally, right over the very top of the first Hollow Purple scar—and pushes him back gently. "Alright," he says softly, pecking Yuuji's mouth one more time before twisting out of Yuuji's grasp. He whistles, and Koso and Kon both come bounding over. The motion sprays Megumi with water, and he splutters, holding up his arms to shield himself. Yuuji laughs; Koso, completely disregarding its master's plight, comes over to butt its head against the side of his face. Yuuji reaches up and scratches it with the three fingers remaining on his left hand.

"Hi, Koso-sensei," he coos. Megumi huffs.

"I told you not to call it that."

"Sensei doesn't mind. Do you, sensei? You don't mind that you're named after him, right?" Koso bats a dinner-plate-sized paw against Yuuji's hair. "No, of course not. Gojo-sensei's cool, of course you're fine with being named after him."

Koso, completely uncaring, flicks its tail and starts wading back towards shore. Yuuji goes along with it, feeling the water lap leisurely at his knees. When he looks back over his shoulder, he has to stifle a laugh; Kon's clearly reluctant to leave the water, and Megumi's got his arms locked around the dog's neck, trying to drag it back to shore.

"Come on, Megumi!" Yuuji calls. Megumi lifts his head. Yuuji's never going to get sick of those eyes on him. "I'm not waiting for you before I start eating!"

With that, he turns around and urges Koso up the beach. And, just as Yuuji predicted, just like Yuuji always knew he would:

Megumi follows him out of the water.

Chapter End Notes

whoo it's over! my first ever multichap fic! can you believe i started this thinking it would cap out at 50k max?

anyway, thank you all for reading and sticking with this, truly words cannot thank you enough. you guys have no idea how much i appreciate you. i hope this ending satisfies the 'angst with a happy ending' tag that i tortured you all with for so long. as always, please comment! i am a serial yapper.

- my objective for this fic was to write itafushi as a successful orpheus and eurydice story. the only way for yuuji to save megumi is to give megumi the tools to save himself —the tools, of course, being love. in other words, yuuji (orpheus) had to walk away without looking back and trust that megumi (eurydice) would follow him. and megumi did!

- nobara helped both yuuji and megumi shop for rings. also, megumi's just holding onto the ring even though he doesn't plan to propose for a few days, so yuuji still gets to propose first. when he kneels down, megumi stares, says nothing, then immediately runs off to grab his own ring. he comes back, shoves it in yuuji's face, and yells YOU SAY YES FIRST!

- blue light yokohama is a japanese song that topped the charts in 1968/69. (eng translation of the lyrics here)

- tiny kirara appearance bc like. come on. her technique's called love rendezvous. How could i NOT use that for itafushi reunion?? also i gave itafushi 'mimosa' bc it's the only binary star in kirara's technique.

- i'm a big fan of yuuji effectively losing his right eye and megumi having aftereffects from infinite void. just...u know...to show that they won but they're not unscathed...

- i have mixed feelings about 268-271, which is why this fic diverges from canon in the post-shinjuku aspects. i have lots of thoughts about megumi living for yuuji and how i think that now yuuji is the one who needs to learn how to live for himself, but i don't want to yap too much. for now, just know that this chapter was the equivalent of me whipping out a bazooka on yuuji and yelling SURPRISE MF YOU NEED TO BE SAVED TOO!

- i think postcanon itafushi would have a lot of issues to work through before dating. i'm planning to write another fic set 10 years post-canon to explore this more, but it's still just a vague idea...we'll see if it ever gets posted!

- i took koso's name (mourning tiger/tiger funeral) and absolutely ran with it. in case it wasn't already obvious, its abilities are very much intended as a metaphor for grief. megumi's koso being a white tiger is because of gojo (appearance) AND yuuji (symbolism), since yuuji was the 'tiger of west junior high' and the white tiger of the

west is a guardian symbol in east asian folklore. also, the 'ita' of itadori can be read as the word for tiger.

- i've decided that i'll be going ahead with the companion fic of deleted scenes and author's notes! When I post it, I'll add a temporary notification chapter to this fic so that subscribers get an email.

- chapter title is of course from THE 'self-love in spite of everything' poem of all time, mary oliver's 'wild geese'. here is the first and more famous half of the poem, which i think is very itafushi post-266:
"You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on."

songs which i listened to while writing this:
- heavy in your arms and blinding, florence + the machine
- francesca, hozier
- i bet on losing dogs and i'm your man, mitski
- everything i wanted, billie eilish
- again & again, the bird and the bee
- sailor song, gigi perez
- not strong enough, boygenius
- atlantis, seafret
- wicked game, chris isaak

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!